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Final Report of the State Leaders Innovation Institute

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Background: History of the NTAR Leadership Center's State Leaders Innovation Institute

The ultimate mission of the National Technical Assistance and Research Center to Promote Leadership for Increasing Employment and Economic Independence of Adults with Disabilities (NTAR Leadership Center) is to promote employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities. The means for accomplishing this broad goal is to build capacity and leadership at the state and local levels in order to encourage change across workforce development and disability-specific systems. Established in September 2007 through a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the NTAR Leadership Center is housed at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Effectively addressing barriers to employment and increasing state and local capacity to address these barriers, requires multiple strategies and the active involvement of many stakeholders. Previous ODEP-supported research has offered several key insights into strategies for improving system capacity to serve adults with disabilities and improve their employment and economic status. The NTAR Leadership Center has derived its strategic goals from this research; its goals are as follows:

1. Expand partnerships and collaboration among and across generic and disability-specific systems that provide employment or employment support services, including leveraging resources and funding across multiple systems.
2. Increase the use of customer choice in services, and integrate funding among and across generic and disability-specific systems, including blending and braiding resources and funding across programs and systems.
3. Increase the economic self-sufficiency of people with disabilities by leveraging relevant generic and disability-specific tax incentives, financial education, Social Security work incentives, benefits planning, and other strategies for enhancing profitable employment resulting in the ability of people with disabilities to accrue assets and resources through employment.
4. Increase the use of universal design as the framework for the organization of employment policy and the implementation of employment services.

5. Increase the use of customized and other forms of flexible work options for individuals with disabilities and others with complex barriers to employment.

To help fulfill its mission and support efforts tied to these five goals, the NTAR Leadership Center launched the State Leaders Innovation Institute (SLII), a pilot project designed to improve inter-agency coordination on policy, program, and service delivery for people with disabilities. For the pilot, the NTAR Leadership Center would select up to three states interested in pursuing cross-agency policy changes and developing new practices to foster a more integrated “to work” system for adults with disabilities. In January 2008, the NTAR Leadership Center distributed a letter to all governors seeking states interested in enhancing the employment opportunities for adults with disabilities by:

1. Integrating disability employment policy into the state’s economic development, economic growth, or sector initiatives;
2. Implementing innovative demand-side approaches to increasing the employment of adults with disabilities;
3. Implementing strategic actions to improve the economic well-being of adults with disabilities; and/or
4. Establishing leading-edge universal and customized approaches for the organization and delivery of state workforce policy that improve connections to training and work for all job seekers, including adults with disabilities.

To apply, each state was required to form a state team appointed by the governor, with members representing economic development, workforce development, disability employment, and the employer community. Thirteen states applied, and in April 2008, the NTAR Leadership Center selected Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota as the pilot states for the SLII.

The NTAR Leadership Center was primarily seeking states that had assembled high-level, cross-agency teams from both the generic and disability-specific workforce and related systems, as well as states that had a history of participating in systems change initiatives such as the Medicaid Infrastructure Grants, Disability Program Navigator initiative, Workforce Innovations for Regional Economic Development, National Governors Association policy academies, ODEP customized employment grants, and others.

Under the SLII, the three selected states were provided:

1. An in-state orientation by NTAR Leadership Center faculty;
2. Two, two-and-a-half-day team-building and strategy development sessions;
3. Access to a peer learning and information sharing network;

4. Customized technical assistance and training, including access to national experts and scholars in the five strategic goal areas; and
5. A discretionary grant up to \$50,000 for project implementation.

State Profiles

Connecticut

Recognizing an impending worker shortage, Connecticut participated in the SLII as part of a broader effort to open new pipelines to talented workers who have traditionally been underrepresented in the labor market. Motivated in part by Walgreens' selection in 2006 of Connecticut as the state where it would build a new distribution center that would employ a workforce, a third of whom would be workers with disabilities, the state placed an emphasis on creating a pipeline for employers to workers with disabilities. The state saw the SLII as an opportunity to achieve this broad objective.

In the first disability employment initiative directed by its governor's office, Connecticut formed a broad inter-agency team to participate in the SLII, chaired by a regional representative from the governor's office and The WorkPlace, Inc., the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) for southwestern Connecticut. Team members came from Department of Labor, the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), Board of Education and Services to the Blind (BESB), Administrative Services, Corrections, Developmental Services, Mental Health and Addiction Services, Economic and Community Development, Community Colleges, WIBs, the Connecticut Business Leadership Network (BLN), and the Connecticut Business and Industry Association.

Connecticut defined its vision for improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities as an equation: "Collaboration + Awareness + Capacity + Inclusive Policy = Jobs." Under the SLII, Connecticut's primary goals were to:

1. Expand collaborations among the many agencies involved in providing assistance to job seekers with disabilities;
2. Increase public, service provider, and especially employer awareness of services available to support the employment of people with disabilities;
3. Enhance the capacity of the public workforce system to serve people with disabilities; and
4. Encourage the adoption of universal design principles.

Originally, Connecticut also set forth the goal of state as model employer. Although team members remained interested in pursuing this goal, they decided given the reality of the recession, the state's dire budget situation, and furloughs and hiring freezes for state workers, that the state would likely be unable to expand its workforce during the course of the SLII and tabled this goal.

The team made significant progress toward reaching its goals. The initial Connecticut team consisted mainly of state agencies that have involvement with employment and disabilities. The team quickly realized that expansion to a broader group of stakeholders was necessary to fully address the employment needs of people with disabilities. The team reached out to the community college system, all of the state's WIBs, and disability-serving organizations. Overall, the team reported progress in terms of the regular sharing of information among all stakeholders about their respective initiatives, challenges, and needs, as well as new opportunities for collaboration, which had not been happening previously.

Specific accomplishments included:

Increased Team Membership by 250%. Connecticut increased the number of members on its team from less than 20 original members to nearly 50. The broader representation facilitated the work of the team by allowing it to divide into sub-committees with separate responsibilities for different functional areas.

Increased Employer Engagement. The Connecticut team engaged in outreach to the business community through The WorkPlace, Inc. and through other partners with connections to employers, business groups, and Chambers of Commerce, in order to expand the Connecticut BLN throughout the state. A dedicated executive director was appointed to re-energize the Connecticut BLN. SLII team members helped the BLN coordinate statewide, cross-agency events, and attendance at quarterly meetings has since increased. The BLN has also become a part of several leadership programs conducted by Chambers of Commerce to promote disability as a part of diversity.

Inter-agency Collaboration for Employer Engagement. The SLII helped to foster a new collaboration between the Department of Labor and BESB to distribute employment incentive information to employers in the quarterly tax form mailings. In addition, contact information to obtain trained workers with disabilities was added to the bottom of Connecticut vendor payment checks.

Inter-agency Study on Assistive Technology Needs in the Workforce System. BRS, the Department of Labor, BESB, WIBs, and community colleges together conducted a statewide inventory of assistive technology and identified the technology that all of the CTWorks Centers in the state should have available for use. Every CTWorks office and community college completed the inventory. Based on the gaps identified in the research, the CTWorks Centers and the community colleges acquired new technology to fill the identified gaps. As part of an emphasis on capacity building, the team also developed online training modules to ensure current and future personnel are knowledgeable about how to use the available technologies. (Assistive technology training modules are available at <http://www.connect-ability.com>.)

The Placement of People with Disabilities in Employment. In 2006, Walgreens selected Connecticut as the home for a new distribution center that was committed to hiring a workforce where a third of the workers would be people with disabilities. To prepare for meeting this employer's workforce needs, BRS, the Department of Economic and Community Development, the Department of Labor, BESB, and the WIBs realized they needed to develop a strategic, coordinated response that would allow them to deliver the trained workforce that Walgreens was seeking. BRS became the lead point of contact regarding training for the new workforce. In 2009, Walgreens hired 130 people with disabilities out of its first 400 hires and expects to expand these numbers in the near future.¹ The SLII team members who had been involved in supporting the Walgreens effort saw an opportunity to institutionalize the approach they had utilized. They recognized that if future employers were to approach the state regarding the hiring of significant numbers of job seekers with disabilities, Connecticut would be prepared to serve them in an efficient and coordinated fashion through what has been termed the "Business Response Model."

Public Awareness Campaign. The team participated in a range of public awareness raising and other events, including the Annual Employment Summit, the goal of which is to open employment opportunities for people with disabilities; the Disability Convention and Expo, which brought together employment specialists from BRS, BESB, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and the Department of Developmental Services to provide job-seeking advice; and the Annual Postsecondary Disability Training, which is designed to help educators meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.

Support for the State's Medicare Infrastructure Grant (MIG). The SLII team made connections to several initiatives run by BRS under its MIG. For example, the team made a commitment to sharing information about the Connect-Ability brand and Web site (<http://www.connect-ability.com>), which is supported by the MIG and serves as the state's web portal for disability resources.

Improved Coordination and Information Sharing Across Agencies. During the course of the SLII project, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services received a grant for the new Employment Practice Improvement Collaborative (EPIC), which is involving many of the same state agency and community partners as the SLII. EPIC is seeking to build an integrated career development infrastructure to improve employment opportunities for people in recovery, in hopes that these individuals will eventually be able to stop receiving Social Security benefits. SLII team leaders reported that having the team improved information sharing and coordination among state agencies in ways that improved the capacity to successfully implement EPIC. According to the team leader, because the EPIC partners had already developed working relationships through their participation in the SLII, they were able to collaborate efficiently from the start of the project and quickly reach agreement on a Memorandum of Understanding.

Maryland

Like Connecticut, Maryland saw the possibility of bringing workers with disabilities into the labor force as a means of meeting significant anticipated employer demand for workers. Governor Martin O'Malley's philosophy that "there is no such thing as a spare Marylander" informed the team's mission of ensuring that everyone with the skills to work participated in the workforce.

In Maryland, the team was co-chaired by two members of the governor cabinet, the Secretary of the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) and the Secretary of the Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR), and later by the Executive Director of the Governor's Workforce Investment Board (GWIB). Maryland brought together members of many different state agencies — the lieutenant governor's office, the Maryland Departments of Education, Business, and Economic Development (DBED), Housing and Community Development, and Transportation; and the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) — as well as community colleges, community-based organizations, and one of the state's larger employers, Northrop Grumman.

At the start of the project, Maryland expected substantial growth in job openings for federal and private-sector workers. Based on the recommendations that the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) issued, the state expected to gain more than 60,000 federal and private-sector jobs, including military and civilian jobs, contractor positions, and support service jobs in areas such as retail and restaurants, with the first wave of jobs anticipated in September 2011.

The Secretary of MDOD believed that this historic influx of jobs offered a unique opportunity to encourage other state agencies and employers to see job seekers with disabilities as an important piece of the talent pipeline to fill these jobs, and therefore as critical to the future economic development plans of the state.

The Maryland SLII team's primary goal was to use the large numbers of jobs expected to result from the BRAC recommendations as a platform for changing the workforce system to better serve people with disabilities and improve their access to employment opportunities. The team believed that the BRAC presented an opportunity because they knew employers were concerned about the state having enough talented workers to meet the anticipated demand. SLII team members thought that the BRAC might be a vehicle for systems change, because if they could reflect the state's needs to employ people with disabilities in the statewide BRAC response plan, they could use that to inform the policies and practices of the entire workforce system.

Moreover, if people with disabilities were going to be seen as part of the solution to meeting some of the demand for workers, the team leaders knew it would require ensuring that people with disabilities had access to information about education and training opportunities and about accessible housing and transportation, which became the primary goals of the SLII. The Secretary of MDOD hoped that the process of making these changes to respond to BRAC needs would produce new cross-agency relationships between departments representing labor, vocational rehabilitation, economic development, transportation, and housing, that would outlast both the SLII and the BRAC. Although the Maryland SLII team was not a formal part of the Maryland BRAC planning process, it chose to use the existing state BRAC action plan as a starting point for discussion and recommendations.

The SLII team had a number of important accomplishments during the course of the project. Most notably, according to the MDOD Secretary, the SLII project allowed Maryland to significantly increase awareness among state leaders — from DBED, DLLR, Housing, Transportation, and the lieutenant governor's office — about the benefits of employing people with disabilities and the many challenges facing those job seekers. This awareness developed over time through a series of meetings dedicated to in-depth reviews of critical issues, including housing, transportation, and workforce development.

Some of the most significant accomplishments that resulted from these inter-agency collaborations include:

GWIB Adoption of a Resolution on Universal Design

In September 2009, the GWIB adopted a resolution highlighting the benefits of universal design in One-Stop Career Centers and calling upon all local One-Stop Career Centers to adopt the principles of universal design. Through the NTAR Leadership Center, five local workforce areas received technical assistance regarding universal design, especially around improving the orientation experience for all customers. The lessons learned in these five local areas will eventually be shared statewide.

Inter-agency Coordination

1. Initiated under the auspices of the SLII, the development of Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between MDOD, DBED, and DLLR facilitated permanent system changes within these organizations. DBED, for example, developed questions for its business representatives to ask employers about their hiring of people with disabilities, and modified its data system to allow staff to enter this information using drop-down menus. In addition, the coordination has led to changes to DLLR's Maryland Workforce Exchange that will

better facilitate access by employers to qualified job seekers with disabilities. The MOUs outlined the roles and resources each agency would contribute to accomplishing these changes. The partnership between MDOD, DORS, DBED, and DLLR led to the hiring of an outreach coordinator and the creation of an online portal providing resources for employers interested in hiring people with disabilities as well as access to qualified candidates, which can be accessed at: <http://www.mdworkmatters.org>. The portal, supported by MIG resources, was accessed by over 100 employers during its first month. Since it was launched in early 2010, MDOD reports receiving thousands of hits and thinks that it has helped to build connections with numerous employers.

2. In keeping with Governor O'Malley's emphasis on measuring outcomes as part of his "State Stats" program, the SLII team identified a need for cross-agency data planning specific to employment of individuals with disabilities. This effort was eventually incorporated into Maryland's recent grant that was awarded under the U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce Data Quality Initiative.

Support for Job Seekers with Disabilities

1. Team members created a series of fact sheets to help prepare job seekers with disabilities for BRAC-related jobs covering the following topics: BRAC, security clearance, credit history, expungement, asset development, universal design, and travel training (available at <http://www.mdeid.org>). These fact sheets grew out of a focus group the SLII team organized with BRAC-related employers to learn about their workforce needs and concerns.
2. MDOD, with resources from the MIG, supported the development of an Essential Workplace Skills Curriculum, used by over 66 job seekers with disabilities. Maryland developed the series in partnership with Harford Community College (available at: <http://www.mdeid.org>).
3. MDOD and the Department of Human Resources hosted an Asset Development Summit, attended by over 60 individuals that resulted in continued dialogue about potential partnerships related to Individual Development Accounts.
4. The efforts of SLII team members resulted in the creation of a financial literacy curriculum specifically related to youth and public benefits to be included as part of a national curriculum, Take Charge America, used by Maryland high schools.
5. SLII team members supported the hosting of No Spare Marylander Workshops and job fairs in key BRAC areas; the workshops were attended by over 100 job seekers with disabilities. (An example of an announcement can be found at: <http://www.mdod.maryland.gov/uploadedFiles/MDOD/Resources/Employment/AA%20County%20Registration%20Form.pdf>.) The agenda for the workshops included disability history and awareness, hearing from successful workers with disabilities, and key job-seeking skills such as résumé review, interviewing, review of One-Stops' services and resources, and benefits counseling. Each attendee also received a job-seeking toolkit that included a messenger bag, portfolio with an interview checklist, "office-on-the-go" kit, and a flash drive with their updated résumé and related job-seeking tools.

Transportation

1. Team members hosted a meeting on Transit-Oriented Development in BRAC areas, which was attended by local housing and disability staff. Efforts are under way to address accessibility issues raised by individuals with disabilities living in Transit-Oriented Development.
2. The SLII team identified transportation as a critical issue affecting BRAC job seekers with disabilities due to the current limitations of public transportation. As a result of the team's work, the Maryland Transit Administration is making plans for the expansion of bus service to Fort Meade as a potential solution to ensuring Paratransit access to the base.

With the team leaders being members of the governor's cabinet, Governor O'Malley and his senior staff were regularly briefed and updated on this project. According to members of the Maryland team, the SLII's most significant achievement has been the development of strong partnerships between MDOD and DBED, DLLR, and GWIB as highlighted in the activities related to universal design and others. While some effort had been made previously to address universal design through the Disability Program Navigator grant, the current efforts have greatly benefited from strong state leadership from key agencies. The NTAR Leadership Center's pilot project facilitated that engagement and support.

Minnesota

Minnesota was motivated by an interest in inclusiveness. The principle underlying Minnesota's work on the SLII was, "We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper."

To translate this overarching principle into reality, Minnesota identified three specific goals:

1. To develop competitive jobs for people with disabilities,
2. To incorporate universal design into workforce development services, and
3. To link employment and prosperity to regional economic development and sector strategies.

In Minnesota, the strategic projects manager at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), Workforce Development Division, chaired the SLII team. The director of Vocational Rehabilitation and the director of Pathways to Employment, the state's MIG, provided critical leadership assistance. Other team members represented DEED's Business Services Unit and the Business Development Division, Minnesota's State Rehabilitation Council, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Human Services' Disability Services Division and Children and Family Services, Pathways to Employment, the Anoka County WorkForce Center, RISE, Inc., and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.

Throughout the course of the project, Minnesota realized the following accomplishments:

Career Awareness and Exploration for People with Disabilities. The Minnesota SLII team made it a priority to adapt the state's Camps-to-Careers hands-on career exploration model to help adults with disabilities and older and dislocated workers. The program exposed participants at 16 Camps to Careers in manufacturing, health care, green jobs, and hospitality sectors, and allowed them to gain applied knowledge in a work setting. These hands-on career exploration camps, funded with a combination of the state's MIG as well as some SLII funding, are considered an important part of the regional economic competitiveness work under way across the state, helping to build a talent pipeline for critical regional industries through partnerships with key employers.

Training for People with Disabilities. Tied to its work under a Joyce Foundation "stackable credentials" project called FastTRAC (Training, Resources, and Credentialing), Minnesota, under the SLII, has linked adults with disabilities who are vocational rehabilitation clients with basic education and occupational skill training courses. Stackable credentials are designed to increase access to and success in postsecondary education and training, often combining basic skills and occupational training into career pathways that can be achieved a little at a time. Building on its SLII experience, the Minnesota team has encouraged its FastTRAC pilot to be built around the principles of universal design to serve a wide range of job seekers.

Universal Design. DEED has made a significant commitment to embedding universal design principles in both the physical space and program planning for its WorkForce Centers and other workforce development initiatives. With assistance from the NTAR Leadership Center, Minnesota conducted a series of universal design focus groups in its Hennepin South WorkForce Center with employers, job seekers, and WorkForce Center and partner staff as part of a process to evaluate the Center's physical space and how it affects service delivery. According to the team leader, framing the focus group questions within a universal design context seems to have expanded the conversation from "what is best for *my* agency and *my* customers" to "what is best for *all* customers and *all* agencies that will help my customers." Focus group participants discussed common strategies to serve all clients, expectations of privacy for all clients, space layouts that promote efficiency and collaboration among agencies, "virtual" WorkForce Center services that increase accessibility and better match client needs with services, and shared staff/services among WorkForce Center partners. Minnesota hopes to use the knowledge gathered through these focus groups to improve the layouts of existing WorkForce Centers when new operating agreements are negotiated and of new WorkForce Centers when existing Centers consider new locations

Additionally, according to the Minnesota team leader, one of the most significant accomplishments of the SLII was that it provided the state with an in-depth opportunity to examine how to integrate services for persons with disabilities into the "mainstream" workforce programs (i.e., the WorkForce Centers in Minnesota.) The state had not done an examination of its service integration strategy since the original Workforce Investment Act (WIA) One-Stop plan was developed in 1998. The work done in the SLII in 2009 prepared the state for addressing the issues raised in the Rehabilitation Services Administration monitoring visit of 2010, as well as preparing leaders to update the system-wide agreements around WIA integration in 2011. Universal design also provided a key organizing principle when program leaders from DEED, including the director of Vocational Rehabilitation, the SLII state lead, and the local WorkForce Service Area Directors, met in early 2011 to update the state's WorkForce Center System One-Stop Partners agreement.

Contributions to Policy-making. The SLII team helped set the governor's priorities for workforce development. In November 2010, Minnesota's state WIB (the Governor's Workforce Development Council) published, *All Hands on Deck: Sixteen Ideas for Strengthening Minnesota's Workforce*. This policy advisory was prepared for the state's new governor and the Minnesota legislature. The experiences of the Minnesota SLII team contributed to the inclusion in the advisory of two specific recommendations that speak directly to the issue of alignment and integration of services for persons with disabilities in the WorkForce Center system. Recommendation 9 is

that Minnesota should serve as a model employer of persons with disabilities, and recommendation 10 calls for ensuring that Minnesota's WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities. (The report can be accessed at <http://www.gwdc.org>.)

Improved Inter-agency Coordination. As in Connecticut and Maryland, Minnesota reported that the SLII experience increased the strength of collaborative relationships between key stakeholders important to serving job seekers with disabilities, including DEED (especially Vocational Rehabilitation Services), Human Services, Education (secondary and postsecondary), State Council on Disabilities, and businesses. According to the team leader, the SLII work and the working relationships that have developed from it have been invaluable in moving recommendations to improve the alignment of services across the WIA Titles in the WorkForce Centers forward.

Challenges

The Great Recession

The Great Recession was the most significant challenge that Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota faced. The economic downturn presented the states with a series of interrelated challenges. First, the recession made it more difficult for the SLII teams to operate and implement initiatives. The dramatic growth in unemployment increased the number of people who needed services from the One-Stop system. Staff time for the SLII pilot projects became more difficult to arrange, with employment policy priorities shifting to addressing the needs of vast numbers of newly and long-term unemployed job seekers. With increasing demand for services but constant staffing levels, One-Stop counselors and state agency staff faced higher workloads, leaving less time for SLII meetings and less time for implementing new initiatives. In Connecticut and Maryland, mandatory furlough days in 2009 also meant less time was available for SLII team projects. Others left to take advantage of early retirement options, resulting in departures of key team members. Over time, new members joined to replace some of the retired team members, but the states reported that this turnover was disruptive to their progress.

Second, the economy clearly affected the ultimate outcome that each of the teams was trying to achieve — to improve the employment prospects of people with disabilities. Fewer job opportunities combined with the influx of large numbers of workers with strong work histories into the unemployment lines made it increasingly difficult for people with disabilities to find employment.

Time Frame for Systems Change

Another challenge stemmed from the original time horizon for the project, which was 15 months. As each of the three states had been involved in other systems change efforts in the past, they were well aware that these types of initiatives may take several years to show results. In the end, the process was extended, but even after two years, one team leader noted that more time would have been preferable, noting: "Systems change requires a significant amount of time and resource to implement."

Building Cross-agency Collaboration and Partnerships

Cross-agency collaboration is critical to serving adults with disabilities in an integrated fashion and to preparing them for competitive employment. The governors from the SLII states were asked to designate high-level, cross-agency teams that represented workforce development, economic development, disability employment, and others as needed, including human services, postsecondary education, corrections, transportation, and housing. The SLII teams spent a significant amount of time and energy building relationships across these multiple agencies and systems. For each of the states, one challenge was simply getting the workforce development, vocational rehabilitation, economic development, human services, education, and other partners to understand each other. Economic development partners were not accustomed to thinking about the employment of people with disabilities as an economic development issue, or to see job seekers with disabilities as part of the state's talent pipeline. And those on the human services side were not accustomed to thinking about tapping into economic development resources and opportunities that might exist to help create jobs for people with disabilities. The SLII tried to bridge some of these divides, and especially to encourage the disability employment programs to find ways to become more employer-focused, demand-driven, and relevant to economic development and sector strategies.

During the course of the SLII, the NTAR Leadership Center produced several issue briefs and hosted webinars that directly addressed some of these gaps in understanding across generic workforce, vocational rehabilitation, economic development, and other systems, including topics such as understanding the basics of economic development, and using Labor Market Information (available at <http://www.ntarcenter.org>).

Need for Unified Federal Disability Policy and Program Alignment

Another challenge the SLII states faced stems from the “patchwork of policies and programs” that make up federal disability programs.² According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, federal disability programs are in need of modernization, with almost 200 federal programs providing various services and supports to people with disabilities “without a unified strategy or set of national goals” to guide them. SLII team members frequently raised concerns over conflicting goals of some programs, different eligibility requirements and definitions of disability, different outcome measures, and especially the effect of siloed federal funding streams. Minnesota team members at times noted that numerous federal policies that provide funding to states for employment services and supports require their programs to be the “payer of last resort.” This creates confusion on both the policy and consumer level of program implementation as employment services must be accessed in a certain order and individuals can be directed to numerous programs before receiving services. Maryland found that the many different federal definitions of disability made it more costly for the state to implement federal disability benefit programs. As a result of the different definitions, the state agencies responsible for implementing different programs had to separately evaluate their clients to document their disability. If a standard definition applied to all programs, individuals would have to be assessed once, rather than multiple times. Maryland also noted that the attorneys for different state agencies have interpreted HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) regulations differently. Some have ruled that collecting Social Security numbers is permitted under the law, while others have concluded it is not. The result is that some state agencies do not collect their clients' Social Security numbers. Without a Social Security number, it is impossible to determine either client employment histories or whether the client got a job after exiting from services, because the Social Security number is the only individual identifier for linking people to their records in the Unemployment Insurance wage record database. MDOD made some progress in calling together a wide range of workforce, education, and other service providers who assist people with disabilities to seek common

ground among development of outcome measures. Responding to the states' concerns as well as highlighting one of ODEP's goal areas, the NTAR Leadership Center hosted several webinars and produced research briefs on the ongoing challenge of "blending and braiding" of resources to better serve people with disabilities.

Employer Engagement

Employer engagement is a challenge for workforce development in general, and especially so in regard to disability employment. The recession no doubt exacerbated the situation, with many employers simply focused on staying afloat during tough economic times, and in many cases downsizing rather than considering hiring job seekers with disabilities. According to SLII team leaders and members, however, even in good economic times, they struggle to get employers to consider job seekers with disabilities as qualified candidates who can help make their businesses more profitable.

As part of their work, the SLII states all experimented aggressively with different strategies to reach employers regarding the hiring of job seekers with disabilities. They each knew, based on other regional development efforts, the importance of having employers communicate their workforce needs if they were going to design responsive workforce programs.

1. Minnesota's DEED has been a leader in supporting regional sector initiatives as a way for the workforce system to better serve and engage employers and job seekers. Under the SLII, Minnesota made efforts to include people with disabilities in sector-focused activities, such as the Camps 2 Careers model, with participating employers coming from health care, advanced manufacturing, and other key industries.
2. Connecticut's SLII team partnered closely with the state BLN. The team also worked to combine employer outreach efforts across multiple agencies, focusing on Connect-Ability as the state's branded vehicle for employers to get information about hiring workers with disabilities.
3. Maryland's employer portal also seeks to consolidate information from various state agencies for employers interested in hiring people with disabilities. In addition, Maryland conducted focus groups with BRAC employers who were considering moving to Maryland, which led to the realization that the state needed to develop information for job seekers with disabilities on specific BRAC-related topics such as how to obtain a security clearance. Partnering with DBED and DLLR enabled the state to arrange targeted BRAC job fairs for people with disabilities.

Believing employer misperceptions about workers with disabilities remain a hurdle, Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota all participated in the "Think Beyond the Label" campaign, which was launched in 2010 as an effort to increase awareness about the benefits of hiring workers with disabilities. "Think Beyond the Label" is a partnership of health and human services and employment agencies working to raise awareness that hiring people with disabilities makes good business sense. (For more information, see <http://www.thinkbeyondthelabel.com>.)

Improving Prospects for Seamless Career Advancement for People with Disabilities

As part of developing a demand-driven approach to disability employment, the SLII states recognized that job seekers with disabilities need to have the skills, education, and training that employers are seeking. Research has begun to demonstrate that regional sector strategy approaches are being used successfully as an organizing framework for meeting business needs while also providing a career pathway for underrepresented populations to access careers in high-skill, high-wage industries.³ SLII team members in Minnesota had commented that historically, job seekers with disabilities were not typically considered candidates for skills training and career pathway programs. Under the SLII, Minnesota has made efforts to expand career pathway and stackable credential opportunities to include people with disabilities. The state has tried to blend aspects of promising strategies for serving job seekers with disabilities, such as customized assessment strategies, with promising practices around sector strategies, credentialing, on-the-job training, and internships. One goal of Camps 2 Careers is to provide job seekers with counseling and hands-on information about careers they may not have considered, which could lead to on-the-job or classroom training and employment opportunities. The model was designed to recognize that job seekers with disabilities and others with barriers to employment may need to receive information in several formats, including through hands-on exploration outside of a classroom environment. This applies to the blended learning opportunities through Minnesota FastTRAC as well. Minnesota is trying to make these programs and services more universally designed so that people with disabilities are able to take advantage of them alongside other job seekers.

The Maryland SLII team leaders came to the conclusion that one missing partner from their effort was secondary schools. Although the SLII was focused on improving employment prospects for adults with disabilities, representatives from the team felt that without involving the secondary school system as a partner, students with disabilities will not be encouraged to pursue the science, technology, and math coursework they will need to prepare for the career pathways leading to the more technical BRAC-related jobs.

Opportunities

Leveraging Other Funding Streams (especially the MIGs)

Each of the three SLII states found vital opportunities to enhance or develop new partnerships with their MIGs. Connecticut's Connect-Ability and Minnesota's Pathways to Employment were active partners on the teams. Maryland's MIG is under the direction of the MDOD, whose Secretary co-chaired the SLII team, facilitating coordination and access to MIG resources. The MIGs provided significant resources that in many cases directly supported the initiatives of the SLII teams. In addition, the SLII teams were able to build on existing MIG efforts. For example, the Connecticut SLII team worked to promote Connect-Ability among the members from many different state and local agencies and their respective constituents as the primary web venue for employers and job seekers with disabilities. Minnesota has also taken advantage of the resources and promising pilot efforts of Pathways to Employment, with the director being a critical member of the SLII leadership team. Pathways to Employment has covered the costs of staff working on different aspects of the SLII and related projects, as well as of expanding the Camps 2 Careers model and other opportunities for internships and work experience for job seekers with disabilities. The Pathways to Employment director was particularly interested in fostering more of a focus on demand-side approaches to assist job seekers with disabilities as part of Pathways to Employment's mission, and she believed the SLII offered the possibility to achieve this.

The states also worked to creatively leverage the resources of other significant activities, such as the aforementioned “Think Beyond the Label” campaign, with which all three states were involved.

Universal Design

As the SLII project evolved, all three states came to see the application of universal design to the workforce system in terms of both space and service delivery as critical. As the state teams contemplated how to better integrate people with disabilities into existing workforce programs, and to ultimately prepare them for integrated, competitive employment, they realized there was an opportunity to use the framework of universal design to improve their services to all job seekers. The workforce system is charged with providing services to a range of job seekers of all ages and skill levels, including ex-offenders, veterans, older workers, dislocated workers, and others. Rather than design separate programs for each cohort, these states are coming to realize there are multiple ways to present information and services that allow them to address the wide range of needs. Maryland, through the GWIB, led the way with the adoption of a statewide resolution on universal design, and the Minnesota Governor’s Workforce Development Council likewise issued a policy advisory recommending that Minnesota’s WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities. The Minnesota team leader commented that designing inclusive spaces and services to benefit many groups is better than designing exclusive spaces and services to meet the specific needs of each group, and Minnesota will continue to encourage the WorkForce Center partners to build on universal design principles in all aspects of their work.

Other Lessons Learned from the SLII

Importance of a Unifying Message/Overarching Goal

The presence of a unifying philosophy and overarching strategic goal helps systems change teams to remain focused and stay “on message.” For example, the Maryland team members frequently referred to Governor O’Malley’s “No Spare Marylander” mandate. Similarly, the Minnesota team often referenced its guiding principle of needing “everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.”

Support from Top State Leadership

Having the “political gravitas” of the governor’s office behind the Connecticut and Maryland SLII efforts helped bring the many collaborators to the table. In Connecticut, the governor’s regional representative co-chaired the team with a regional WIB, indicating that the governor herself supported disability employment as a priority issue. Maryland is unique in having a cabinet-level secretary of disabilities. The Maryland SLII was co-chaired by the governor’s secretaries for both disabilities and labor, which facilitated collaboration between these agencies. It also made it easier for the team to involve high-level officials from other key agencies that might not otherwise have seen disability employment as relevant to their day-to-day work, including housing, transportation, and business and economic development, and the lieutenant governor’s office, which had responsibility for the overseeing the Maryland BRAC subcabinet. Without the leverage and authority of the cabinet secretaries, it would have been much more difficult to bring agencies together to make the kind of systems change needed to improve employment and other opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Importance of Depth of Staff Participation

Two levels of staff resource involvement are necessary for systems change initiatives to progress. The high-level representation of key agency heads is necessary in terms of setting priorities for the group and leveraging cross-agency resources. At the same time, there needs to be ground-level collaboration to attain the team's goals and implement the specific action steps. The teams all made use of various ad hoc subcommittees that often reported back to the permanent teams.

Keys to Sustainability

Sustainability can be enhanced by developing online resources and training modules that can be available to future One-Stop Career Center staff, customers, employers, and others involved in the workforce development system. The Maryland and Connecticut SLII teams each made efforts to develop online resources that would outlast the SLII pilot to enable sustainability of their efforts. Connecticut team leaders frequently mentioned staff turnover in One-Stops as a concern and made a commitment to having the assistive technology training modules readily available as needed to train new staff. Partnering with Connect-Ability allowed the team to have a permanent repository for these and other resources. Maryland used the SLII as an opportunity to develop resources that will be relevant to job seekers both with and without disabilities who are interested in BRAC-related employment for the foreseeable future. The online web portal <http://www.mdworkmatters.org> will likewise provide a permanent home for these materials.

Reflections: What the Federal Government Can Do to Encourage and Support State Systems Change Efforts and State Leaders

“Bureaucratic systems tend to resist change. It requires the leadership of champions and other change agents to foster innovation in systems, to take new innovations to scale, and to sustain the changes over time.”⁴

The SLII provided three states with an opportunity to pursue systems change by making closer connections between disability employment and generic workforce and economic development. The hope was to find high-level and committed state leaders who could encourage their peers from other state and local agencies to come together in support of improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The NTAR Leadership Center was looking for the pilot states to build on other systems change initiatives they were currently or had previously been involved with, such as the MIG. It was also hoping the SLII states would expand models they had used with other populations, such as workforce development sector strategies, and adapt those in ways that made sense for job seekers with disabilities. The state leadership teams of Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota all made considerable headway in achieving these goals.

Based on the experience of the NTAR Leadership Center SLII states, the federal government can further encourage systems change efforts to improve employment prospects for adults with disabilities and support the state leaders who champion them through the following:

Provide opportunities for leadership training and peer exchanges. All three states noted that, especially given the ongoing turnover in state leaders over time and the always competing priorities, additional opportunities for the pilot states to meet away from the day-to-day stress of work would have enhanced their efforts. They also felt these in-person exchanges became a catalyst for many new ideas and revitalized their teams' efforts.

Use the reauthorization of WIA to streamline aspects of federal disability employment policies and provide coordinated guidance across the Federal Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services. The Minnesota SLII team, in particular, is striving to achieve its vision of a fully integrated and collaborative workforce development system that encompasses the state's network of one-stop WorkForce Centers, vocational rehabilitation, education, human services, and the business community. However, Minnesota leaders have found it challenging to move beyond "rule-bound silos and fragmented funding constraints." State leaders there have expressed a need for better integration of the four titles of WIA, as well as ways to develop a cost allocation and reimbursement formula that sustains the integrated and collaborative WorkForce Centers without disproportionate contributions by any partner. Minnesota believes coordinated guidelines from the Federal agencies of Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor would help achieve this. Minnesota's One-Stop operating partners from WIA Titles I (adult, youth, and dislocated worker), III (Wagner-Peyser), and IV (vocational rehabilitation) along with partners from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs, which are operated in most Minnesota WorkForce Centers, have recently redesigned their cost allocation agreements based on feedback from a recent Rehabilitation Services Administration monitoring visit. However, the Minnesota state team leaders believe this experience has made it clear that if states are to achieve a vision of a fully integrated and inclusive workforce system as outlined in WIA, states need technical guidance from the federal partners and better alignment across programs.

The vision of the NTAR Leadership Center in launching the State Leaders Innovation Institute was to encourage three leading states, with the support of their governors, to work toward the development of a workforce system that can provide job seekers with disabilities with improved access to the training, education, and employment services they need to move from career exploration to jobs and careers. Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota each used the SLII opportunity to reflect their own state's unique priorities, but within those, they each worked to blend strategies for disability employment with their efforts to align their workforce systems to better reflect employer needs. They strove to coordinate their efforts across an array of state agencies, some of which did not typically consider disability employment a priority. They all came to realize that their workforce investment systems might be strengthened in their ability to effectively and efficiently serve job seekers with disabilities, and all other job seekers as well, if they could apply the principles of universal design to their programs and services, which they have committed to continuing to pursue in the future. Through the SLII, and through their other ongoing efforts, all three states are striving to change the attitudes of employers, state policymakers, local service providers, and, in some cases, people with disabilities themselves, about the ability of people with disabilities to work in integrated, competitive employment. These pioneering efforts on the parts of state leaders in Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota may take time to fully realize, but they should be commended for leading the way.

Endnotes

1. For more information about Walgreens, see Nicholas, R., Kauder, R., Baker, D., and Krepcio, K. (2011). *Ready and Able: Addressing Labor Market Needs and Building Productive Careers for People with Disabilities through Collaborative Approaches*. New Brunswick, NJ: NTAR Leadership Center, Rutgers University.
2. U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2011). *High Risk Series: An Update* (GAO-11-278). Washington, D.C.: Author.
3. For more information on sector strategies, see the Workforce Strategies Initiative of the Aspen Institute at <http://www.aspenwsi.org/>.
4. Herbert, S. (2010). *Changing Systems is Like Moving Mountain...And Other Insights from Successful Workforce Leaders*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Appendix

Please note that a number of the publications cited in this appendix were created by organizations other than the NTAR Leadership Center. Thus, they may not be compliant with accessibility standards.

Executive Summary, Leading the Way: The First Year of the State Leaders Innovation Institute

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Leading_the_Way_Executive_Summary.pdf

Connecticut Inventory of Assistive Technology Needs and Connecticut Assistive Technology Summary of Inventory

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Connecticut_Survey_Inventory.pdf

CTWorks Poster

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Connecticut_Poster.pdf

Connecticut Flyer Distributed by Department of Labor announcing availability of Economic Stimulus Funding Project by Board of Education and Services for the Blind and Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Connecticut_Flyer.pdf

Maryland Universal Design Resolution

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/documents/ResolutionUniversalDesign.doc>

Maryland No Spare Marylander Workshop Flyer

<http://www.mdod.maryland.gov/uploadedFiles/MDOD/Resources/Employment/AA%20County%20Registration%20Form.pdf>

Sample Maryland Fact Sheet on BRAC

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/BRAC_Fact_Sheet_0.pdf

Maryland BRAC Poster

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/BRAC_Poster.pdf

Maryland Essential Workplace Skills Webinar Series Flyer

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Webinar_Flyer.pdf

Maryland Memorandum of Understanding between Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation and Department of Disabilities for Intensive Workshops/Employer Outreach

http://www.ntarcenter.org/sites/default/files/Maryland_MOU.pdf

Minnesota All Hands on Deck Minnesota All Hands on Deck: Sixteen Ideas for Strengthening Minnesota's Workforce, Governor's Workforce Development Council 2011 Policy Advisory

http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

Minnesota's 21st Century Regional Prosperity Initiatives, including NTAR Leadership Center SLII work

http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment/Appendix_2.pdf

About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

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