

JUL 21 2015

Dear Governor:

As we honor the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), we celebrate the successes and accomplishments this landmark legislation made possible for millions of individuals with disabilities across our nation. We also recognize the need to press on in the unrelenting pursuit of innovative approaches and effective tools for breaking down barriers to the mainstream workforce for unemployed and under employed Americans, especially those with disabilities.

Across our country, too many people with disabilities who want jobs are not able to find employment. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the jobless rate for Americans with disabilities was 12.5 percent, more than double the unemployment rate for people without disabilities at 5.9 percent. And worse, about eight in ten individuals with disabilities were not participating in the labor market in 2014, meaning they were not working or were not seeking employment. In comparison, just three in ten individuals without disabilities were not participating in the labor market.

Against that backdrop, State governments are working to improve integrated employment opportunities and the economic advancement of the youth and adults with disabilities. As chief executives of their States, Governors have the responsibility to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity for productive employment. State leaders also are recognizing the need to advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities as a State priority and to incorporate it as part of their overall workforce development strategy.

In recent years, a national movement referred to as *Employment First* has emerged to provide a framework to give people with significant disabilities the opportunity to launch careers in integrated settings earning at or above the minimum wage. This framework is centered on the premise that all citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in competitive, integrated employment and in typical community life. This growing commitment at both the State and Federal level to the principles of *Employment First* is predicated on data that validates the capabilities of individuals with significant disabilities for performing competitive, integrated employment with the proper customization of supports and accommodations. **In short – it's the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do for taxpayers, and it makes good business sense.**

Our nation's Federal civil rights framework has influenced and accelerated State *Employment First* efforts by affirming that individuals with disabilities have the right to choose where to live and work, and to participate in integrated activities in their community—a critical component for citizens with disabilities in developing a full and meaningful life.

Several Federal agencies have already applied the ADA principles outlined in the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Olmstead v. LC* to employment services. This reflects a consistent Federal approach in support of *Employment First* goals. And now, with implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Pub. L. No. 113-128), there exists an even

greater opportunity for State governments to align their planning efforts and key systems, including workforce investment, vocational rehabilitation systems, partner systems, and WIOA implementation efforts to support *Employment First*.

Many States have made notable progress in creating innovative, successful approaches to supporting both youth and adults in acquiring competitive, integrated employment opportunities by implementing seamless work-based learning strategies.

Wisconsin is one of six states participating in the Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) initiative to support youth who receive Supplemental Security Income in meeting their school and work goals in order to improve their income levels and their financial stability. Wisconsin is 41 percent of the way to its goal of 2,000 enrollees by April 2016.

Oregon's Employment First Initiative, one of the first in the country, was the catalyst for State agencies to work together in improving community job outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The goal of a new marketing campaign and website is to connect job-seekers with employers who need their skills, with the unifying message, "I Work, We Succeed."

In January 2014, South Dakota announced the recommendations of its Employment Works Task Force for employing people with disabilities, including making the Department of Human Services a single point of contact to educate employers, provide technical assistance, and connect employers with qualified individuals with disabilities. "For too long some have seen employment of people with disabilities as a favor done with sympathy," Governor Dennis Daugaard said, "but I agree with the Employment Works Task Force – that needs to end in South Dakota."

We recognize that many States desire to further align their efforts to support individuals with disabilities toward an *Employment First* approach, and a number of resources and technical assistance efforts are available to help lead such change. For example, as part of a 2012-2013 national initiative led by Governor Markell as its Chair, the National Governors Association (NGA) released the report, *A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities*. This blueprint for Governors outlines key strategies that State governments can implement to increase competitive, integrated employment options for both youth and adults with disabilities. Those strategies include finding and supporting businesses in their efforts to employ people with disabilities, being a model employer by increasing the number of people with disabilities working in State government, and making the best use of limited resources, especially through the Federal government, to advance employment opportunities.

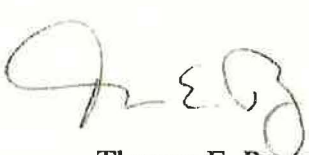
Additionally, States are able to engage with other colleagues in the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP). EFSLMP is a cross-disability, cross-systems initiative that provides high-impact technical assistance to State teams focused on aligning policies, coordinating resources, and transforming service delivery models to implement *Employment First* goals with fidelity and increased competitive, integrated employment options for youth and adults with the most significant disabilities.

A number of additional technical resources are also available to help States to apply existing Federal policies, civil rights law, and resources to support their continued *Employment First*

efforts on the U.S. Department of Labor's website at <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/EmploymentFirst.htm>. Additionally, State government officials and external stakeholders interested in participating in the Department of Labor's National Employment First Community of Practice are encouraged to register at: <http://www.econsys.com/efslmp/?subscribe>.

We remain committed to partnering with State governments to promote ongoing *Employment First* efforts whose endeavors are providing a clear path toward harmonizing publicly funded systems with current civil rights law to assure the full inclusion and advancement of individuals with disabilities in our nation's communities, the general workforce and the greater economic mainstream. We need the best of what every American has to offer. Americans with disabilities comprise a highly untapped resource of loyalty, ingenuity, and productivity. *Employment First* can help States connect these workers with employers to improve their businesses and our economy.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Perez  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor



Dennis Daugaard  
Governor  
State of South Dakota



Jack Markell  
Governor  
State of Delaware