

# South Dakota Employment Works Task Force

## Recommendations for Employing People with Disabilities



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## Executive Summary

South Dakota Governor Dennis Daugaard's Employment First Initiative was inspired by his involvement with the National Governors Association (NGA). Governor Daugaard assisted Governor Jack Markell of Delaware with holding forums as a part of the NGA's 2012-13 initiative to explore ways to increase the employment of people with disabilities. The group specifically examined ways that governors can provide the leadership necessary to make significant advancements in

employing people with disabilities in their respective states. A blueprint for governors, entitled "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities," was developed by the NGA.

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*"Both of my parents taught me the value of hard work, and I saw their pride in self-sufficiency."*

– Gov. Daugaard, on his parents who were deaf

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Governor Daugaard told participants at an NGA forum in early 2013 of his experience growing up the son of a profoundly deaf father and severely deaf mother in eastern South Dakota. He described how his parents' disabilities affected life at home, where he and his siblings grew up using American Sign Language even earlier than spoken words. He was inspired by what his parents taught him about the value of hard work and independence. Governor Daugaard told the NGA he wanted to do more in his own state to develop and maintain employment opportunities for South Dakotans with disabilities, using his unique upbringing to form his leadership.

Governor Daugaard announced his Employment Works Initiative in the spring of 2013, and a task force was created in July 2013 to help guide his efforts. Assembling a broad spectrum of interests was considered integral to the success of the South Dakota Employment Works Task Force: businesses, individuals with disabilities and their family members, legislators, nonprofit stakeholders, providers and state agency representatives. Members were recruited from across the state, and meetings began in August 2013.

This report takes into account all of the observations, ideas and suggestions of the task force and crystallizes them into five prevailing recommendations:

- Find and support businesses to employ people with disabilities.
- Connect businesses to employees with disabilities.
- Eliminate disincentives to employment for people with disabilities.
- Develop flexible systems and promote promising practices.
- Educate the public, providers, employers and people with disabilities.

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*"I believe that in this world people with disabilities often develop higher levels of determination and accomplishment because they have to."* – Gov. Daugaard

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Over three meetings, recommendations from the Employment Works Task Force began to take shape. The result of the task force's work is contained within this report with the ultimate goal of increasing the employment rate for people with disabilities in South Dakota.

## ***Employment Works Task Force Membership***

### **Businesses**

- **Julie Benz** – Avera McKennan, Sioux Falls
- **Jennifer Erickson** – Camille's Sidewalk Café, Sioux Falls
- **John Fenske** – Lowe's, Rapid City
- **Gary Isenberg** – Larson Manufacturing, Brookings
- **Sam Jennings** – South Dakota State University, Brookings
- **Andrea Kern** – National Park Service, Midwest Region-West, Hot Springs
- **Darin Seeley** – Black Hills Corporation, Rapid City
- **Cindy Walsh** – Dakota King, Inc., Sioux Falls
- **Don Wiltgen** – Walgreens, Rapid City

### **Individuals and Family Members**

- **Deb Docken** – Sioux Falls
- **Beth Haug** – Custer-Hermosa
- **Terry Rist** – Sioux Falls
- **Wendy Rossman** – Rapid City
- **Milt Schlichenmayer** – Pierre
- **Brenda Smith** – Sioux Falls

### **Legislators**

- **Rep. Don Haggar** – District 10, Sioux Falls
- **Rep. Paula Hawks** – District 9, Hartford
- **Rep. Leslie Heinemann** – District 8, Flandreau
- **Sen. Bruce Rampelberg** – District 30, Rapid City
- **Rep. Fred Romkema** – District 31, Spearfish
- **Sen. Deb Sohlt** – District 14, Sioux Falls



### Nonprofit Stakeholders

- **Monica Burgess** – Council on Developmental Disabilities, Rapid City
- **Wendy Parent-Johnson** – Center for Disabilities-Sanford School of Medicine, University of South Dakota, Sioux Falls
- **Shelly Pfaff** – South Dakota Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, Pierre
- **Elaine Roberts** – South Dakota Parent Connection, Sioux Falls

### Providers

- **Lyle Cook** – Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Oun'iyekiyapi Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Eagle Butte
- **Rick DiSanto** – South Dakota Achieve, Sioux Falls
- **Rennae O'Connor** – SESDAC, Inc., Vermillion
- **Gloria Pluimer** – Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, Sturgis
- **Alan Solano** – Behavior Management Systems, Rapid City

### State Government

- **Laurie Gill** (Task Force Chair) – Department of Human Services (formerly), Bureau of Human Resources (currently)
- **Kim Malsam-Rysdon** – Department of Social Services
- **Pam Roberts** – Department of Labor and Regulation
- **Melody Schopp** – Department of Education
- **Kim Stahl** – Bureau of Human Resources

### Membership

Bringing together a broad spectrum of interests was considered key to the success of the task force. Members were recruited from across the state and included people with disabilities as well as family members. Both small and large businesses were invited to the table along with a director of a Native American Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program and a veteran.

## Observations: “What Works” and “What Doesn’t Work”

As noted in the Executive Summary, the task force’s initial efforts centered on assessing what is functioning well in South Dakota as well as what is not. Here is a sample of the members’ observations.

### *What Works*

- Eliminating financial disincentives to work.
- Expanding transition services to younger students.
- Increasing the role families play in supporting employment and self-employment as options.
- Increasing the expectations of work for people with disabilities in society (schools, teachers, parents and other community members).
- Illustrating what is possible by using success stories from employers and people with disabilities to effect change in others.
- Training employers and provider staff working with employers to dispel fears regarding termination of employees with disabilities.
- Identifying employer “champions” who hire people with disabilities.
- Strengthening collaboration between the Department of Labor and Regulation and Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Exploring ways to implement pre-employment training at an earlier age (e.g., Project Skills).

### *What Doesn’t Work*

- A limited amount of supported employment services for people with significant disabilities in South Dakota communities with limited resources.
- A limited amount of long-term supports for individuals with mental illness.
- A shortage of well-trained job coaches in certain areas of the state.
- A limited amount of collaboration among job developers in identifying job openings.
- A limited amount of coordination among service providers resulting in multiple contacts to employers.
- Inaccessibility for people with disabilities trying to apply for jobs online.
- Inconsistency throughout transition (18-21 years of age) and employment services.
- Shortage of summer employment options for students with disabilities.
- Missing avenues of networking with employers who have jobs available.
- No education plan to introduce all students with IEPs and 504 plans to employment opportunities.
- Inconsistency of provision of transition services among schools.
- Not reviewing and revising reimbursement structures for employment services.

**Recommendation 1:** Find and support businesses to employ people with disabilities.

**Summary**

Employers represented on the task force made it clear that they value an easy access point when they explore hiring people with disabilities. They expressed that the best approach was to have a technical assistance support system led by employers. They also recommended that a system with a single point of contact be developed that employers can utilize to receive information and assistance in hiring people with disabilities.

The task force members, especially those representing business, reiterated a point that was addressed in the National Governors Association's "Blueprint for Governors": it is easier for employers to find and hire workers with disabilities if they have a single point of contact. The Blueprint also cited the need for states to dedicate staff with business expertise to act as business liaisons.

There is a growing trend in which vocational rehabilitation agencies and other similar entities are including employers as customers along with their traditional base of people with disabilities. A strong relationship with an employer has at its foundation the understanding that the service provider can help the employer to meet staffing needs. Collaboration must take place with employer organizations to enlist employers' input on their workforce needs, as well as their need for technical assistance, and their concerns about hiring people with disabilities. Examples of such organizations include the Society of Human Resource Managers, the South Dakota Retailers Association and local chambers of commerce.

**Strategies:**

1. Create a single point of contact at the state level to interact with business.
2. Partner with business organizations to reach employers (e.g., S.D. Retailers Association, chambers of commerce).
3. Expand the number of business-led organizations that employers can go to for technical assistance and consultation when employing individuals with disabilities.

**Actions:**

- DHS will dedicate a business liaison position to develop and disseminate materials, conduct marketing and serve as a resource to employers, providers and people with disabilities. This position will serve as a single point of contact for businesses. (1)
- DHS will develop and distribute model policies that address accessible work places and reasonable accommodations. (1)
- DHS will provide information and technical assistance through existing business organizations. (2)
- DHS will assist in development of and contract with business-led organizations to facilitate the start-up of additional technical assistance resources for employers. (3)



## Background

The DHS Business Liaison will serve as the lead for activities recommended throughout this report. This position will approach employment of people with disabilities from a business perspective and will be responsible for organizing events and developing and distributing materials for technical assistance including model policies. This position is the key to planning and delivering many of the activities recommended throughout this report.

The Sioux Falls Business Resource Network (BRN) is one example of a support system for employers led by business leaders. The BRN is a nonprofit corporation promoting the hiring of people with disabilities by the local labor market by demonstrating the advantages of hiring people with disabilities. They educate employers and the public through a message that hiring people with disabilities will assist businesses in improving their production and efficiency.

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*Employers that were represented on the task force made it clear that they value an easily accessible point of contact when they explore the hiring of people with disabilities.*

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This model offers employers a resource that they trust will be looking out for their best interests when looking for ways to meet their workforce needs. Task force members pointed out that for employers, hiring people with disabilities can represent the unknown. Therefore, training for employers to dispel fears is recommended. The task force members discussed the implementation of employer-led organizations like the BRN be replicated in other communities in the state. Other business models will need to be explored for rural areas including working with service organizations and other business-related entities such as the South Dakota Retailers Association and chambers of commerce. (*Business Resource Network: <http://www.sfbrn.org/>*)



**The DHS Business Liaison will serve as the lead for activities recommended throughout this report.**



## Recommendation 2: Connect businesses to employees with disabilities.

### Summary

In the past, programs like public vocational rehabilitation have too often approached businesses with a plea to “do the right thing” by hiring people with disabilities. While this approach has worked in some instances, the opportunity to promote the value that people with disabilities add to an employer’s business has been neglected.

A better approach is to encourage a paradigm shift from hiring someone with a disability because it will be good for the person to making the business case for employing people with disabilities. In addition, the recent push from employers who need a diversified workforce due to federal rules and regulations has created opportunities to connect people with disabilities to careers.

#### Strategies:

1. Solicit employer staffing needs.
2. Host events that support collaboration with employer-led organizations to solicit input from employers.
3. DHS will work with the S.D. Department of Labor and Regulation to address workforce needs and labor market trends.
4. Build the capacity in South Dakota state government to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities.
5. Develop the expertise of vocational rehabilitation staff and service providers.

#### Actions:

- The DHS Business Liaison will be the single point of contact for employers. (1, 2, 3)
- DHS will conduct a survey of employers to help identify their staffing, training and technical assistance needs for employing individuals with disabilities. (1)
- Utilize the SDWORKS site and other labor exchanges to connect businesses to candidates with disabilities. (1, 3)
- Develop employment opportunities in state government through business models that promote employment of people with disabilities (e.g., Project Skills, Project Search, job carving). (4)
- DHS will support business-led technical assistance and support systems for employers. (2, 5)
- DHS will expand and enhance job development and job training services. (5)

## Background

The Business Liaison position will take the lead in gathering input from employers and addressing their staffing, training and technical assistance needs through existing or new resources. This position will also serve as a resource to other state agencies including the Bureau of Human Resources and the Department of Labor and Regulation.

Governor Dugaard has stated that he will direct state government to act as a role model, starting with a focus on how state agencies can improve their own policies and hiring practices.

The task force supported the Governor's efforts to hold state government accountable for its own hiring practices as one of the largest employers in the state. State government will serve as a model employer by incorporating strategies to increase the number of citizens with disabilities who work in state government. There are a variety of options for incorporating systems to increase opportunities for employment of people with disabilities. One

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*Employers reported that a high percentage (58%) of accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest typically cost only \$500.*

(Job Accommodation Network survey)

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example of a viable option is to customize jobs to allow for employment of individuals with disabilities who can perform some functions of a job, but not necessarily all of the requirements. This approach is accomplished through taking requirements out of other jobs and creating a new position. This often frees up existing employees to concentrate on other responsibilities.

The task force recommended increased use of "labor exchanges" to connect businesses to employees with disabilities. The Department of Labor and Regulation has strong connections with employers across the state and operates a labor exchange entitled "SDWORKS," where employers can list job openings and candidates can search for jobs in which they are interested. At the time of this writing, there were 11,782 job listings on SDWORKS. The Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP) is another example of a labor exchange. Still in development, the TAP is a specialized software system that employers will be able to use to search online to find qualified workers with disabilities.

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Another resource being developed by the Department of Labor and Regulation as a result of the Disability Employment Initiative is an "electronic rolodex." This project is a website that is an information portal for people with disabilities. It enables individuals to see the support organizations available and what they provide. The plan is to have this be an easy-to-use resource so people can understand why they would want to access the services available. Basically, it categorizes support organizations by what they do, how the services work, why the potential employee would want to access these services, an explanation of the benefits and how to access the services. All along the way it links to the support organization's website for further information. This has the potential of being a valuable tool for the individual, parents and family, teachers, counselors, caregivers and others working to assist the person with disabilities.

One example of a recent federal policy shift is the U.S. Department of Labor's final rule that makes changes to the regulations implementing Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act (effective March 24, 2014). This rule prohibits federal contractors and subcontractors from discriminating against individuals with disabilities for employment and requires these employers to take affirmative action to recruit, hire, promote and retain these individuals. The rule establishes a nationwide 7-percent utilization goal for qualified individuals with disabilities. It also strengthens the affirmative action provisions of the regulations to aid contractors in their efforts to recruit and hire individuals with disabilities and to improve job opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Information with accessibility tips and resources is available from a variety of sources. Additional resources will be developed that identify agencies and individuals available to provide technical assistance in South Dakota. Distribution will need to be implemented to ensure the materials are widely available to employers. Another employer incentive that will be promoted is the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC). The WOTC is a federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain target groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities who completed or are completing rehabilitation services from a state-certified agency, an Employment Network under the Ticket to Work program or the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. (*Job Accommodation Network: <http://askjan.org/>*)



**The Employment Works Task Force met three times over August and September of 2013, working to prepare strategies for increasing the employment of South Dakotans with disabilities.**



### Recommendation 3: Eliminate disincentives to employment for people with disabilities.

#### Summary

The task force identified a need to address financial disincentives to employment for people with disabilities. Related topics discussed were the Home and Community Based Waiver Services for people with intellectual disabilities, prioritizing employment-based services for people supported by the Community Support Providers, and support for benefits counseling services provided to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) recipients.

#### Strategies:

1. Address the CHOICES waiver cost-share requirement for earned income.
2. Increase the number of people in integrated employment opportunities, thereby reducing the number of people in sheltered work environments.
3. Provide education to beneficiaries, family members, and providers on SSI/SSDI benefits and employment.

#### Actions:

- DHS will assess the feasibility of removing the cost-share in the CHOICES waiver to address disincentives to employment. (1)
- Convene a DHS financial work group to address fees for employment services and Medicaid waiver requirements that will incentivize integrated employment for people with disabilities. (2)
- DHS will increase the number of certified benefits specialists providing services to individuals with disabilities and their family members to help beneficiaries understand the impact of employment on their benefits. (3)

#### Background

In 2012 the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) hosted numerous public forums throughout South Dakota to gather public input. This information was gathered from self-advocates, family members and stakeholders in the field of developmental disabilities. DDD was working with the Department of Social Services (DSS) – South Dakota's Medicaid agency – and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at the time to renew the CHOICES comprehensive Medicaid waiver. This waiver provides services and supports to South Dakotans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Self-advocates, family members and others engaged in the developmental disabilities system brought forward employment as a key topic. More specifically, they said the current cost-share in the CHOICES waiver is a disincentive to work. Several self-advocates indicated they would like to work more, but when they do, everything they earn is applied to the cost-share. Because of this they do not get to keep any earnings beyond the \$400 allowed in the current waiver.

The task force was supportive of moving people with disabilities into competitive, integrated employment settings wherever possible. It was recommended DHS lead a financial work group to address fees for employment services and Medicaid waiver requirements that incentivize individualized, integrated employment.

The task force was clear about its support of benefits counseling services for recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Task

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*When compared to other Vocational Rehabilitation consumers, those who received services from a benefits specialist had a higher success rate, higher weekly earnings, more weekly hours and higher average hourly earnings.*

(Division of Rehabilitation Services)

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force members saw a need to expand and enhance benefits counseling services for individuals and family members. Continuing to provide training to beneficiaries and providers that serve people with disabilities was also recommended.

South Dakota currently has a Benefits Specialist Network funded by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the DHS/Division of Rehabilitation Services.

The goal is to assist beneficiaries in maximizing their earning potential and

achieving greater self-sufficiency through employment. Benefits specialists undergo extensive training to become certified to provide services based on SSI/SSDI work incentives, Medicaid, Medicare and other public programs. Benefits specialists provide information and referrals for other services, benefits analysis and planning, and long-term monitoring and follow-along services.

When compared to other Vocational Rehabilitation consumers, those who received services from a benefits specialist had a higher success rate, higher weekly earnings, more weekly hours and higher average hourly earnings. Additional aspects that task force members considered in making this recommendation:

- SSI beneficiaries receiving the full amount of SSI have total income below the Federal Poverty Rate.
- Beneficiaries who are working are paying taxes and participating in community life.
- Employment leads to wider social networks, more choices and increased self-worth.

SSA work incentives have been created to address barriers to employment caused by benefits eligibility. Some incentives remove the barrier, while others encourage working by rewarding employment activity. The recommended action to increase the number of certified benefits specialists will increase the number of SSI/SSDI beneficiaries that understand work incentives and the impact that employment has on their benefits. This will result in more SSI/SSDI beneficiaries returning to work and maximizing their earnings.

**Recommendation 4:** Develop flexible systems and promote promising practices.

**Summary**

Employment Works Task Force members uncovered many examples of state agencies and service providers working together. Collaborative efforts to provide services to people with disabilities combined with promising practices driven by the individual will help ensure people with disabilities are a vital part of South Dakota's workforce.

Task force members recommended increasing the expectation of work as an outcome for people with disabilities throughout society. One way to accomplish this is by sharing success stories, including those from the employers' perspective. In addition, it is imperative to get this message to families of children with disabilities early and often so there is an expectation their children can and should work as they transition into adult life just as there is an expectation for people without disabilities. Attitude follows action. Whatever strategies are put together, there is a need to consider policies and procedures in the context of what works for individuals.

**Strategies:**

1. Develop services and systems to address the needs of underserved populations (e.g., Native Americans and veterans).
2. Expand person-centered career planning services.
3. Expand transition services to prioritize employment at an early age.
4. Align policy and funding to prioritize employment outcomes.
5. Engage individuals with disabilities in policy development.

**Actions:**

- DHS will sponsor an annual gathering to promote options for employment of people with disabilities on Native American reservations in South Dakota. (1)
- Formalize outreach efforts to veterans' organizations to address employment of veterans with disabilities. (1)
- Incorporate a rate to reimburse providers for the facilitation of the team approach for delivering employment services. (2, 4)
- Train vocational rehabilitation counselors and providers on the person-centered career planning model for service provision. (2)
- Utilize the Office of Community Living to work with the Department of Education and school systems to change expectations of employment for young people with disabilities and their families. (3)
- Provide people with disabilities ongoing opportunities for input on DHS policies and practices including members of the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired, Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Statewide Independent Living Council, the DDD Core Stakeholders, and the Family Support Council. (5)



## Background

The task force discussed that supports are needed for Native Americans with disabilities residing on and off of the state's reservations. Ongoing cultural-competency training for staff was recommended in order to ensure that services are provided in a culturally relevant manner. Events will be held on reservations to promote employment options and services available for people with disabilities residing on the state's reservations.

Veterans with disabilities were recognized as another group needing assistance with employment. The Divisions of Rehabilitation Services and Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired work with the Veterans Administration to assist veterans with disabilities in obtaining employment. In addition to employers, the state should look to other veterans' organizations and its own Department of Veterans Affairs as potential partners in these efforts.

A person-centered approach ensures that services are developed with the input and participation of the person with a disability and other stakeholders, resulting in improved satisfaction and quality of services. Person-centered practices enhance, reinforce and strengthen a person's natural supports whenever possible. Training for professionals, families and participants will reinforce the use of simple person-centered thinking tools. Several models that utilize the person-centered approach were identified by the task force. Following are two examples:

- The Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) builds on the Disability Employment Navigator model. The DEI is designed to help young adults in the Black Hills area, ages 18 to 24, transition from high school to post-secondary education or to the workforce. The intent of the grant is to implement a systems change in the public workforce system to better serve young people with disabilities. Grant services will improve the educational, training and employment outcomes of youth with disabilities, as well as their access to the Department of Labor and Regulation (DLR). As the grant builds a successful model, the effective practices will be implemented in other DLR locations across the state.
- The Career Development Team (CDT) was another model identified as a promising practice. CDT has been successful in supporting individuals with disabilities to become more fully employed in careers of their choice. This model has been successful in supporting people seeking first-time employment or people seeking to make a career change. CDT members are identified and invited to participate by the person with a disability who is seeking employment. The team is a supportive network of community members who work with the person with a disability to identify and pursue employment opportunities within the community. CDT members may be a former teacher, a business person, a fellow church member, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a coffee group member, a service coordinator, a friend, a family member – anyone with whom the individual feels comfortable working to reach his or her employment goals. Most CDTs have met for an hour each month for six months, but time commitments can vary. Staff of the South Dakota Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities and Black Hills Special Services Cooperative acted as facilitators for past career development teams through funding from the Freedom to Work Project.

Task force discussion from the first meeting included the importance of “transition” services for individuals with disabilities who are preparing to move from secondary school to employment or post-secondary education. Transition services are considered valuable and are working, but could be strengthened by providing career exploration, self-advocacy and work experiences to more students at earlier ages.

Two examples of transition services currently available in South Dakota:

- Project Skills was highlighted multiple times during the task force meetings. This service is provided in partnership between state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and local school districts. Staff from VR and the school districts work with students with disabilities to identify a work experience that fits with the student's interests and abilities. An employer in the community that would be a good match is then identified. The school districts provide ongoing job coaching and supports to the student and employer, while VR pays wages to the students.
- Another transition service is the Project SEARCH High School Transition Program. Project SEARCH is a unique, one-year school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace and is led by businesses. Total workplace immersion facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration and hands-on training through worksite rotations. Funding for this program comes from the Department of Human Services (divisions of Rehabilitation Services and Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired) and the local school district. The employer is the key to initiating and maintaining a Project SEARCH site in a community. Current Project SEARCH sites in South Dakota are at Avera St. Luke's in Aberdeen, Avera McKennan in Sioux Falls and South Dakota State University in Brookings.



**On the job with Nick (photo courtesy of Project SEARCH)**

The newest effort designed to positively impact education and employment of young people with disabilities is the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) Initiative. Under the PROMISE grant that was awarded in October 2013, South Dakota will use an experimental approach to provide coordinated services and supports to children with disabilities, ages 14 to 16, who are receiving Supplemental Security Income. The goal is to improve the education and career outcomes of this age group. This initiative will provide an array of services and supports to participating children and their families, including case management, benefits counseling, career and work-based learning experiences, and parent training and information, as well as other services and supports.

Duplication of existing models that have proven results in new settings is one approach to addressing this recommendation. Efforts to address employment for youth, veterans and Native Americans in South Dakota will require a customized approach. The person-centered approach takes into consideration the unique needs of each individual in service delivery.

**Recommendation 5:** Educate the public, providers, employers and people with disabilities.

### Summary

Education was one of the overarching themes that permeated the task force discussions. Education will be a key to promoting the abilities of people with disabilities to succeed in the workforce. It will also be the primary method of dispelling some of the myths that surround employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

There are systems in place in South Dakota to make employment in the community a reality for people with disabilities, and there are employers that are willing to look to people with disabilities to fill their labor needs. In order to improve the employment rate of people with disabilities, task force members felt that education was necessary for the public, providers, employers and people with disabilities.

#### Strategies:

1. Plan and sponsor events that recognize outstanding efforts of employers in hiring people with disabilities.
2. Build and promote employer champions.
3. Promote the abilities of people with disabilities to employers.
4. Assess the current educational materials available to employers and create additional materials if needed.

#### Actions:

- DHS will sponsor events that recognize employer champions and employment of people with disabilities (e.g., Governor's Awards on Employment of People with Disabilities and National Disability Employment Awareness Month activities). (1, 2)
- DHS will sponsor events to promote education and training on employment and disability related topics (e.g., reasonable accommodations, assistive technology, Work Opportunity Tax Credit). (1, 2)
- DHS will sponsor trainings to develop marketing interaction skills of job developers and vocational rehabilitation counselors. (3)
- The DHS Business Liaison will develop materials to market the availability of the untapped workforce to address workforce shortages. (3, 4)

### Background

The task force supported events that are designed to recognize employers for their efforts in hiring people with disabilities. The annual Governor's Awards on Employment of People with Disabilities, for example, has recognized the achievements of employers, individuals with disabilities and other South Dakotans for their leadership and contributions in this area.



Another opportunity to recognize stand-out employers is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Held each October, NDEAM is a national campaign that raises awareness about disability employment issues and celebrates the many and varied contributions of America's workers with disabilities. The theme for 2013 was "Because We Are EQUAL to the Task." In South Dakota in 2013, NDEAM events were held in 11 different communities statewide; many of the events recognized local employers for their contributions as well as educated the entire community on the abilities of workers with disabilities.

In addition to NDEAM events, it was recognized by the task force that further education and outreach to employers was needed. It was noted that it may not be necessary to "reinvent the wheel" by developing new educational materials for employers. Resources like the Job Accommodation Network and the U.S.

Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy have a variety of employer resources that are already available. In fact, there are so many resources available that it can be overwhelming. Therefore, it is recommended that existing materials be assessed for their value to employers in South Dakota before proceeding with a plan for distribution, education and possible creation of additional resources.

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*There are systems in place in South Dakota to make employment in the community a reality for people with disabilities.*

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In recent years, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies have recognized the need to treat employers, as well as VR clients, as their customers. VR has sponsored training to develop the marketing and interaction skills of job developers and VR counselors statewide. The task force was in agreement that it makes sense to emphasize this training effort for VR staff and providers to ensure that employers receive the message that hiring people with disabilities will result in a better bottom line.

## Conclusion

The formation of the Employment Works Task Force and this report are the initial steps in a longer journey to addressing the employment of South Dakotans with disabilities. The preceding recommendations, strategies and actions are the culmination of efforts from a broad spectrum of perspectives that included people with disabilities and their family members, the business community, legislators, representatives of state government, service providers and nonprofit stakeholders.

This report identifies several action steps that can be taken toward progress for employing more South Dakotans with disabilities. This must be an ongoing collaborative effort of public, private and nonprofit entities that hold a stake in the matter: employers, state agencies, service providers and others, with individuals with disabilities at the center of the Employment Works Initiative. Continued involvement from individuals with disabilities and other stakeholders will be key to ensuring that efforts to raise the employment rate of people with disabilities are successful.

Employment Works Task Force members wish to acknowledge Governor Dennis Daugaard for his leadership and for highlighting employment of people with disabilities as a priority in the state of South Dakota. We look forward to the activities and outcomes of this important initiative.



**Gov. Daugaard uses American Sign Language to speak with an attendee of the 2013 Governor's Awards recognizing employment of citizens with disabilities.**