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Dear Commissioner Albin,

Thank you for sharing Nebraska's draft Combined Workforce plan and asking for public comment. We applaud your agency's commitment to transparency and collaboration and are excited about the impact the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act will have on Nebraska. It is disappointing, though not surprising to see in the plan, that the employment rate for Nebraskans with disabilities ages 18-64 is only 45.5% when the employment rate for that same group who do not have disabilities is 82.6%. This clearly illustrates the need for enhanced support and policies that support individuals with disabilities and assist them into opportunities for competitive employment. The Nebraska Departments of Labor, Education and Health and Human Services can help to improve employment outcomes by working collaboratively and implementing policies that can help facilitate opportunities for competitive integrative employment for individuals with disabilities.

The lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities has an impact on the state as well. According to the report, in 2012 alone, Nebraska's total expenditure on Social Security Disability Insurance benefits was \$594,300,000. This statistic illustrates the need for our state to make employment for people with disabilities a priority and to adopt Employment First¹ policies across agencies and funding streams.

The Nebraska Statewide Independent Living Council is a council mandated by Federal law, the Rehabilitation Act as amended by WIOA 2014. NESILC is primarily composed of individuals with disabilities, our Council works to ensure that people with disabilities are able to achieve independent living.

Employment is a critical component of independent living as access to competitive work opens many doors and allows all people opportunities to have choice, independence and success. The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act provides a platform that can help to remove these barriers. The following are themes that the NESILC and other undersigned agencies would like clarified or added to Nebraska's plan in order to improve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Specific activities are available in the appendix.

- Adopt 'Employment First' Policies and implement across agencies and programs
- Increase marketing and outreach efforts to raise awareness of disability employment
- Integrate Vocational Rehabilitation and American Job Center programs and efforts
- Increase public awareness and program transparency
- Evaluate Employment Outcomes

Appendix

Adopt 'Employment First' Policies and implement across agencies and programs

- Implement and align 'Employment First' policies as outlined in Governor Markel's report, "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities:"²
- Name an 'Employment First Ambassador' for Nebraska to participate in the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program³

Increase marketing & outreach efforts to raise awareness of disability employment

- Describe marketing efforts that will be utilized to raise awareness of the supportive services available to people with disabilities available from Vocational Rehabilitation and the American Job Centers.

- Incorporate an outreach and marketing plan for federal contractors with Section 503 requirements⁴ to help them identify, recruit and hire individuals with disabilities.
- Market and prioritize placement for individuals with disabilities in the Career Pathways and College and Career Readiness Initiatives to provide training and inclusion into the employment pipeline.
- To demonstrate success in youth transition and integrated, competitive employment and to help 'set a higher standard' for both families and employers, utilize social media to market individual stories and disseminate to disability organizations, other state agencies and groups across the state.

Increase public awareness and program transparency

- Incorporate an individual with a disability and a disability organization onto the state workforce board so that a voice speaking to the barriers is available and heard by members
- Require representation of an individual with a disability and a disability organization in addition to Vocational Rehabilitation (or the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired) on the Boards of the Local American Job Centers.
- Include the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's required Memorandum of Understanding between Vocational Rehabilitation and state Medicaid, Developmental Disabilities, and Behavioral Health Agencies in the state plan to insure transparency and to help break down the siloed programs.
- Include the Nebraska Department of Education Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation's Interagency Agreement on Youth Transition in the state plan and make available online to facilitate transparency and insure consistency of services across the state.
- Continue to work with Nebraska's Division of Developmental Disabilities to identify a process for providing supported services to youth with intellectual/developmental disabilities prior to the age of 21.
- Identify other sources of funding to expand Assistive Technology Partnership's impact and eliminate its waiting list for equipment and home modifications which help keep individuals with disabilities employed and able to remain in their own homes.

Integrate Vocational Rehabilitation and American Job Center programs and efforts

- Provide additional details on the coordination and collaboration between Vocational Rehabilitation and Nebraska’s American Job Centers.
- Incorporate options counselors as a required partner within each American Job Center to ensure people with disabilities are provided accurate information about working without fear of losing essential benefits such as Medicaid and are aware of employment incentives.⁵ (Much like Nebraska’s Veterans’ Program)
- Expand Vocational Rehabilitation’s secondary school marketing efforts to include marketing directly to students (and families) who currently are eligible for special education and would be 504-eligible under the Rehab Act so that they know that transition services from VR are available within their local education agency.
- Explain the process for identifying 504-eligible high school students⁶ and connecting them to Vocational Rehabilitation and American Job Center services and internship opportunities in the state plan. Make this information available online to facilitate transparency and insure consistency of services across the state to increase employment opportunities for youth with disabilities who may not be eligible for special education.
- Utilize 504 eligibility to help identify students with disabilities who have dropped out of school and provide wrap-around services from the Nebraska Department of Education, Local Education Agencies, Vocational Rehabilitation and the American Job Centers to avoid involvement with juvenile justice and stop the special education to prison pipeline.^{7 8}

Evaluate Employment Outcomes

- Subcontract with a third-party to build an online satisfaction survey/assessment to insure accessibility to all individuals seeking information about employment throughout all of Nebraska's employment programs.
- Track and report the percentage of individuals with disabilities that have obtained competitive, integrated employment as well as their time in the workforce and include this data in each annual report.
- Track high school youth with disabilities' transition from high school into post-secondary education and employment by local educational agency and require a satisfaction survey be provided to each student/family to evaluate their experience.

We would welcome further conversations about this topic.

References:

¹ <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/employmentfirst.htm>

² https://governor.delaware.gov/docs/NGA_2013_Better_Bottom_Line.pdf

³ <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/EmploymentFirstGovernors.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.dol.gov/ofccp/regs/compliance/section503.htm>

⁵ <http://www.chooseworkttw.net/about/work-incentives/index.html>

⁶ <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>

⁷ <https://www.ncd.gov/publications/2015/06182015>

⁸ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/tsr/education-under-arrest/school-to-prison-pipeline-fact-sheet/>



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