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Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) is designed to support the competitive employment of people with disabilities. Awarded to the Connect to Work Center at the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, Connecticut Department of Social Services, the grant is intended to facilitate enhancements to the state Medicaid program and services, to promote linkages between Medicaid and other employment-related service agencies and to develop a comprehensive system of employment supports for people with disabilities.

To achieve these goals and strengthen the employment infrastructure for Connecticut residents with disabilities, Connecticut is developing a comprehensive, statewide strategic plan. MIG Steering Committee members determined at the outset that the strategic plan should be based on the needs and experiences of people with disabilities and employers. A comprehensive needs assessment has been conducted as a first step in the strategic planning process. Beginning in January, 2006, the Connect to Work Center contracted with the University of Connecticut Health Center (UCHC) to conduct a statewide needs assessment for the MIG. With direct guidance from the MIG Steering Committee, the UCHC research team developed a multi-pronged approach to contact people with disabilities, employers, and service providers throughout Connecticut to assess their experiences, attitudes, and observations about employment for persons with disabilities.

The needs assessment included seven distinct research activities. This approach was used to gather information from multiple sources and stakeholders.

- 1) We conducted an extensive search of relevant literature. This step guided the development of the methods and instruments for collecting data.
- 2) Connecticut census and Department of Labor data were examined to set the context.
- 3) Potential partners were sought out from existing State councils, Workforce Investment Boards, and other entities.
- 4) People with disabilities completed a survey by telephone, in-person, or by mail. The survey included both quantitative, forced-choice questions and qualitative, open-ended questions about their experiences, expectations and needs regarding work and personal assistance.
- 5) Key informant interviews and focus groups with stakeholders were conducted. People with disabilities, family members, employers, and service providers participated in group discussions and one-on-one interviews that utilized a guiding set of open-ended questions addressing the key areas of concern.
- 6) A mailed survey went out to members of four regional Chambers of Commerce to gather input from employers.
- 7) The employment processes of four key State agencies were explored and mapped to identify strengths, weaknesses, overlap, and opportunities for collaboration and streamlining in the existing State system.

This executive summary provides a synopsis of all the Connecticut specific data. Please see the literature review in the full report for a national perspective.

I. Connecticut Employment and Disability Status

Strategic planning is in large part guided by the current and future composition of the population to which it is targeted. The accuracy of the plan can be complicated by public policy, changes in the social and economic well-being of constituents, improvements in health status, and various other societal constructs. Despite the possible margin of error, the data results can serve as a guiding framework in the decision-making process.

Connecticut is experiencing a “soft revolution,” whereby knowledge is replacing physical resources as the main driver of economic growth (Mark A Stankiewicz, 2006, Office of Research, Connecticut Department of Labor). For example, 75% of the top 100 fastest growing jobs will be derived from fields requiring basic and/or advanced knowledge of math, science, or engineering. In addition, growth is expected to be highest in management and professional fields, with approximately 78,000 new positions created during the next 10-year period. This change represents more than 55% of Connecticut’s job growth.

Department of Labor data document six of the fastest growing industries from 2002 to 2012 in Connecticut, including: healthcare, retail trade, education, finance/insurance, leisure/hospitality, and professional/technical. During this 10 year time period, the following job gains are predicted:

Health Care	35,470
Retail Trade	16,640
Education	13,690
Finance/Insurance	9,960
Leisure/Hospitality	14,440
Professional/Technical	15,530

Parallel to these industry growth trends, are the fastest growing occupations. Nine of these top occupations are listed here by annual growth, annual job openings, and 2005 average salary.

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Annual Growth</u>	<u>Annual Job Openings</u>	<u>2005 Average Salary</u>
Registered Nurses	524	1,181	\$62,063
Retail Salespersons	440	2,314	\$22,064
Customer Service Representatives	375	820	\$33,380
Accountants and Auditors	258	637	\$62,209
Teachers Assistants	254	682	\$23,352
Computer Systems Analysts	250	358	\$70,984
Social/Human Services Assistants	248	384	\$37,074
Nursing Aides/Orderlies	224	537	\$26,768
Food Preparation Workers	218	709	\$20,365

Despite what appear to be employment opportunities, recent estimates of unemployment among people with disabilities remain high. Mirroring the national average, the employment rate of working-age individuals with disabilities in Connecticut is approximately half of the rate of working-age individuals who are not disabled, 80% vs. 44% (Disability Status Reports, 2004; Stapleton, O’Day, & Livermore, 2005).

For individuals with disabilities who worked full-time/full-year, median labor earnings were \$35,000 in 2004. At the same time, for people without disabilities in Connecticut, median labor earnings were \$45,000. In contrast to earnings, median household income for people with disabilities was \$45,000 in 2004. People without disabilities experienced a higher median household income (\$80,000 in 2004).

An important variable directly related to employment potential is educational status. When comparing working-age individuals with disabilities to those without disabilities, the educational differences are striking. For example, over twice as many individuals without disabilities have bachelor's degrees or higher when compared to people with disabilities (38.8% versus 16.6%).

A critical aspect of employment trends in Connecticut is the older workforce. Labor data indicate that by the year 2010, Connecticut will have the seventh oldest population, with a median age of 39.6 years. Within 20 years, 18% of the state's population will be age 65 or older. In essence, Connecticut is entering a period of skilled worker shortage; a prime opportunity for older workers and people with disabilities to enter the labor market. The needs assessment presented here looks at overlap in the needs of these two groups.

II. Assessment of Partners

A key component of the MIG strategic plan was the identification of potential partners within the State's system who expressed commitment to advancing the goal of employment for people with disabilities. Interview questions were crafted to elicit helpful information to aid in planning for a supportive and inclusive workplace.

Between January, 2006, and May, 2006, the MIG team conducted a purposeful search of numerous State Councils, Workforce Investment Boards and other entities. In some cases, organizations were identified from State lists and relevance to employment appeared promising. In other cases, a working knowledge of the environment pointed toward Workforce Investment Boards, entities which had been partners in previous efforts, or which were recommended by contact people whose opinions were considered valuable.

The primary objective was to garner information and support in our effort to address the unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities. The search had several secondary objectives: 1) to gather general information about the identified entities, including up-to-date contact information, mission statements, and priorities; and, 2) to provide education about the employment of people with disabilities, as well as the activities of the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant to address employment issues.

A telephone call was initiated with each of the identified groups. When available, websites were reviewed for additional information. Many groups were willing to share volumes of information about their respective entity. Once received, this information was reviewed and filed. The team concluded that the review process would be most useful if the results concluded with a summative rating of the entity in relation to the MIG planning process: very relevant, relevant, maybe, no. An entity categorized as very relevant would have experience with employment and persons with disabilities, have a mission statement reflecting employment as a priority, or have a demonstrated commitment to the topical area. Entities deemed relevant would be those that reflect the aspects listed above, but to a lesser degree. The category "maybe" is reflective of an entity that expressed interest, commitment or willingness to partner, but has limited or no

experience around the issue of employment. Finally, the category “no” acknowledged a group that was either irrelevant or verbally noted that there was no interest in the topic.

A total of 50 targeted interviews were completed: State Councils (n=30); Workforce Investment Boards (n=5); other entities (n=8), and Non-Profit organizations (n=7). Of these, 16 entities received a rating of very relevant and are committed partners in the MIG project.

III. Key Informant and Focus Group Interviews

More complex, qualitative information was derived from the key informant and focus group interviews. These interviews and discussion groups represent the voices of over 320 stakeholders, including people with disabilities, family members, service providers, state agencies, policymakers, and employers. Individuals with a variety of disabilities were interviewed: physical, intellectual, mental illness, hearing, and/or vision disabilities. This included people with disabilities living not only in the community, but those living in institutions such as prisons, group homes, or long term care facilities.

Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), results of the focus group and key informant interviews demonstrated that many Connecticut residents with disabilities have yet to be successfully employed and do not feel protected from discrimination in many employment practices, including job application procedures, hiring, firing, promotion, benefits, and leave. While there have been improvements in the way people with disabilities have gained access to Connecticut’s workforce, the overall sense among these participants was that there is still a long way to go in providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities who are qualified to work and who may or may not need reasonable accommodations.

One overarching theme was the importance of focusing on the individual and their strengths, not their disabilities. To promote strengths, there was a strong sense that preparation for employment should start earlier and that the public, including teachers, employers, co-workers, service providers and the community at large should be educated about people with disabilities. The need for accommodations varied by disability and individual, and included the need for communication, flexibility, job coaches, mentors, personal care assistants, and physical access. In addition, larger concerns regarding transportation and adequate housing need to be addressed and were key issues.

Many people with disabilities value work and want to participate in the workforce, but acknowledge they are in a dilemma and are fearful that if they earn too much money they will lose the benefits that are necessary to pay for disability-related costs. It was also evident that increased financial incentives are clearly a motivating factor for employers, along with reduction in the perceived risk of hiring a person with disabilities. Results showed that both people with disabilities and employers would like increased and longer term support services. In addition, creativity and thinking outside of the box was stressed by many participants as an important part of the problem-solving process.

Themes from the focus groups and key informant interviews were grouped into the following content areas, with greater explanation given to selected areas: an aging and retiring workforce, advantages of hiring people with disabilities, barriers to employment for people with disabilities, transitional services, employer barriers, experiences employing people with

disabilities, experiences working with agencies and employers, and strengths and weaknesses of the existing service system.

Advantages to hiring people with disabilities

Multiple advantages to employers of hiring people with disabilities were identified by participants. Overall advantages include:

- Untapped pool of qualified workers
- Add diversity to the workplace
- Increase level of awareness for co-workers, customers, and employers
- High job motivation, commitment, and dependability
- Job supports often available
- Tax credits for employers

Experiences employing people with disabilities

Some of the employers had limited experience with employing people with disabilities, while other primarily contract through provider agencies. Employers and providers with experience related the following:

- Positive experience for most employers
- Job coach or other supports important
- Contracting with a provider agency cost effective
- People with physical disabilities more attractive to employers than those with mental illness or other hidden disabilities

Barriers to employment for people with disabilities

People with disabilities often face multiple challenges to obtaining employment, including the following from the focus group and key informant interviews:

- Societal preconceptions and lack of awareness
- Low expectations
- Individual attitudes and beliefs
- Employment discrimination
- Benefit programs' limitations and complexity
- Transportation difficulties
- Lack of satisfying job opportunities
- Challenges in the hiring process
- Lack of job accommodations or support
- Need for skills and training, including social skills
- Personal care assistance
- Housing issues
- Lack of information about resources

Employer barriers to hiring people with disabilities

From the employer's perspective, barriers to hiring people with disabilities were as follows:

- Concerns about liability
- Lack of financial incentives for employers
- Accommodation concerns
- Lack of skilled, qualified applicants
- Co-worker concerns
- Concerns regarding relapse
- Employers' preconceptions and assumptions
- Lack of awareness and knowledge

Transitional services: The role of schools, service providers and families

Creating improved transitional services, which begin earlier and are broader in scope, was also a concern, including:

- Necessity to create a successful life in the community with financial independence
- Limited availability of transition services
- Lack of school involvement, and strengths vary by school system
- Scope of services often limited
- Necessity to develop life skills in addition to employment skills
- Improved services needed for those in long term care, prison, or other institutional residences
- Importance of parental and family support

Experiences working with agencies and employers

Employers and agencies both reported mixed experiences when working with each other.

Employer point of view:

- Creation of partnerships between employer and agency or provider best
- Agencies can provide skilled and qualified employees
- Agency vocational programs provide outsourcing for unskilled work
- Agencies not providing appropriate potential employees
- Extra paperwork involved
- Lack of knowledge regarding available agencies and the employment services they could provide

Service provider point of view:

- Employers in the service industry most receptive
- Personal connections helpful
- Frequently depend on the individual manager or corporate guidelines
- Great diversity in which types of employers or companies were willing to hire people with disabilities

- Great effort needed to convince employers to try the person as an employee, especially for potential employees with mental illness or behavioral issues
- Difficult to find an employer willing to provide needed accommodations
- Some employers more willing than others

Strengths of the existing service system

Elements of the existing community-based programs or State agencies are effective supports. These are not found in any one program, and their effectiveness often relies on the individual program or agency. Existing supports identified by respondents included:

- Job training
- Employment supports
- Vocational services such as career and benefits counseling
- Personalized approach
- Ability to create person-centered employment with employers
- Creativity and innovation

Weaknesses of the existing service system

Drawbacks of the current system were more easily identified and need to be addressed:

- Lack of funding
- Understaffing
- Gaps in the system
- Not enough interagency collaboration
- Lack of public transportation
- Time limited supports
- Lack of continuity of support
- Difficulty individualizing supports
- Risk of loss of benefits
- Lack of innovation

Positive suggestions

Positive suggestions from respondents included the following (order listed does not necessarily denote significance):

- Start earlier in school to prepare individual for independent living and employment
- Improve transportation
- Improve inter-agency coordination and communication
- Educate employers, including CEOs, managers, and staff
- Communicate more effectively with people who are deaf
- Improve understanding of benefits, benefits counseling, rules, and Social Security
- Funding for more services, supports, and staff
- Mentoring programs, especially for those returning to the community
- Peer assistance programs, such as offering a financial incentive to a co-worker who trains and assists a person with disabilities at work

- Individualized method of allocating funds
- Increase employer incentives, including incentives specifically for accommodations
- Actively solicit small employers to hire people with disabilities
- Onsite supervisors
- Increased provider and employer training
- Increased support for employees with mental illness or behavioral issues
- Create an ombudsman or liaison with business to advocate for employees with disabilities

IV. People with Disabilities in Connecticut: Interviews and Mail Survey

In addition to the focus groups and key informant interviews, a mail survey and telephone and in-person interviews were used to include a greater number of people with disabilities in this needs assessment. Effort was made to include people with all types of disabilities, including physical, intellectual, and mental illness disabilities. The survey instruments included an extensive section on employment, as well as questions regarding disability, personal assistance services (PAS), health, housing, transportation, and demographics. A total of 642 mail surveys or telephone/in-person interviews were completed. Surveys were completed by people with physical, intellectual, and mental illness disabilities, and by people who were currently working, had worked in the past, or had never worked.

A. Employment

Employment status

A total of 630 employment forms were completed. Of these, 572 (91%) were from working-age respondents, considered to be adults under age 70. Almost half of working-age respondents indicated they were currently working for pay (47%), and almost the same number indicated they had worked in the past (45%). Preliminary analysis noted marked differences in responses between the three employment status groups: currently working, worked in the past, and never worked for pay. Highlights of these findings are presented below.

- Current workers reported a younger onset of disability and fewer worked prior to onset of disability.
- The great majority of those who had worked in the past described their job as competitive employment, versus only one-third of those currently working.
- The majority of current wage earners (81%) and almost half of those who worked in the past (48%) reported earning less than \$10.00 an hour, or just over \$20,000 a year, if working full time. Wages were especially poor for current workers; over half of current workers earn less than \$8.00 an hour.

Employment satisfaction and attitudes

Overall, both current and past workers liked their jobs and received some intrinsic rewards from working. Most looked forward to coming to work, felt needed as a result of working, and had at least one co-worker who was a friend. Satisfaction with their schedule and wages was also reported by both groups, with job security and satisfaction with their supervisor expressed by a

majority of current workers. A majority of respondents also gained other social rewards from working in the form of friendships in the workplace. For most, however, this friendship at work did not lead to spending time together outside of work. Although better paid and less likely to be underemployed, those who worked in the past expressed a somewhat lower level of job satisfaction than current workers. Other results include:

- Most respondents with either current or past work experience liked their job.
- Although reporting low wages overall, over one-third of both current and past workers strongly agreed that they were “happy with the amount this job pays (paid).”
- The two groups differed markedly in how they viewed their supervisors, with current workers much more likely to be satisfied with their supervisor than those who had worked in the past.
- The majority of past workers used “a lot” of their talents and abilities on the job, compared to fewer than half of those currently working.

Some dissatisfaction with their jobs was expressed by current and past workers as well. They worked hard, had little chance of promotion, would need additional training in order to get a better paying job, and received poor medical coverage and few benefits. Although most respondents from both groups felt worn out at the end of the day, still over half of those currently working indicated they wanted more hours. Current respondents were especially not satisfied with the medical coverage provided by their job, and did not anticipate a promotion in the next year.

Employment challenges

Using an open-ended question with space to write in answers, respondents were asked to describe the employment challenges they face. Challenges listed by respondents naturally fell into the following ten themes, the first five of which represent the most frequently mentioned by all respondents:

- Physical health problems or physical disability
- Transportation
- Personal assistance at work or at home
- Intellectual disability or cognitive difficulties
- Emotional difficulties or mental illness disability
- Work place accommodations
- Training or education
- Assistance to find job
- Lack of jobs with benefits or good pay
- Concerns about loss of benefits
- Older age
- Other or not specific

A few similarities and differences were found when examined across employment status.

- Physical health or physical disabilities was the number one employment challenge, mentioned in the most responses no matter what the person's employment status. These issues were especially difficult for those not currently working.
- Transportation was a barrier for respondents no matter what their employment status.
- Lack of personal assistance posed more of a problem for those who never worked.
- For those currently working, challenges related to intellectual disabilities, transportation, and mental illness were especially important.

Supports important for employment

While the majority of current workers did not need support from assistive devices, the majority of those who never worked rated many of these supports as very important for them to be employed. Those who worked in the past, as well as those who never worked, indicated aids for mobility and access were most important. Supports or modifications of interest to all three groups included vocational rehabilitation services, case manager support, and control over work pace or scheduling. Job coaching was less important for those who worked in the past than either current workers or those who had never worked, and personal assistance was most important to those who never worked. One-third of working respondents reported needing on-the-job modifications for their current job. Modifications still needed by current workers included computer aids, extra training, support staff, and flexible hours.

Future job plans

Although over half of those who worked in the past or never worked said they wanted a job, the great majority of those not working indicated they were not currently job hunting and were not optimistic about getting a job in the future. The majority of those currently working do not want a different job and therefore do not plan on leaving their current job in the next year. Support needed to either get a job or get a new job included more training or more education, computer skills, transportation, job coaches, on the job training, and assistance with finding a job.

Job meaning

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were listed by respondents when asked to describe what having a job means to them. Extrinsic motivations included incentives such as earning money and being able to pay one's own way. The majority of responses indicated intrinsic rewards were a greater motivation. These include both personal and social rewards. Respondents reported increased self-esteem, feelings of independence, a sense of accomplishment, and feeling needed. Others spoke of giving back to society, being part of the community, and contributing to the workforce. The social rewards associated with having a job and connecting with other people were very important as well.

B. Personal assistance services

In an effort to include the different types of paid assistance a person may receive, personal assistance services (PAS) was defined broadly as any paid assistance the person receives, defining it as, “People sometimes employ someone to help them with tasks like personal care, mobility, or communication. This person could be a personal assistant, helper, or anyone else who is paid to help them at home or at work.” Areas of interest for PAS included:

- Experience and satisfaction
- Confidence in working with a personal assistant (PA)
- Locus of control
- Preferences for self-directed care

Experience and satisfaction

- The majority of non-working respondents (both past and never worked) currently use paid personal assistance, compared with less than half of current workers.
- Overall satisfaction with PA services was high. The majority of respondents were very satisfied with PA quality of work and service schedule.
- Still, four out of ten respondents reported problems or difficulties with their PA, including lateness, poor quality of work or not doing their work at all, bad attitude, theft, and unreliability.
- More past workers without a current PA indicated they would like these services than those currently working or who had never worked.

Confidence in working with a PA

- Those who had worked in the past had the highest levels of confidence in their abilities to find and hire a PA, to talk directly to a PA who is not doing a good job, or to work out any disagreements they might have with the PA, and current workers were the least confident group on each of these items.
- Fewer respondents agreed they could find a replacement if their scheduled PA could not come in, and this did not differ by work status. Comments made it clear that people who are connected to an agency have an easier time getting a replacement on short notice.

Locus of control

Self-directed care depends on the person’s ability to take part in the different aspects of their provision of care. To employ personal assistants for home or work, complete self-direction includes meaningful participation of consumers in the recruitment, management, and payment of their personal assistants. However, often a person’s desire for control over their assistance falls somewhere along a continuum, from no participation whatsoever, to participation in, and control of, every aspect of care. Using a scale modified from Sciegaj, Capitman, & Kyriacou (2004), this desire, or locus, of control was examined in three basic areas: finding and hiring;

training and managing; and paying the PA. Please note these responses are not mutually exclusive.

Finding and hiring a PA: Many respondents expressed a desire for some help, with one-third or more of respondents wanting assistance from either family members, a State agency, a case manager or a provider agency. Almost one-quarter of respondents wanted complete independence in this area.

Training and managing a PA: Respondents' preferences followed a similar trend as with the recruitment of their PAs, although not quite as much assistance from others was desired with this area. No assistance in the training or management of a PA was desired by just over one-quarter of respondents.

Paying a PA: Overall, respondents wanted less family assistance and more professional help, especially from the State, for this activity. Only about 15% of respondents were willing to take this on alone.

Preferences for self-directed care

When locus of control for PAS was examined using vignettes in the in-person interviews, more respondents chose the scenario which included some outside assistance, than either the traditional provider agency model or complete self-direction. The preferred approach was a modified plan in which the individual and the personal manager or provider agency of their choice work together to determine what services and schedule are desired, find these services, and purchase them. While most respondents wanted to have some say in the service schedule, services to be provided, and choice of PA, the majority still desired some help or guidance with some of the more challenging aspects of employing a PA, namely for training, hiring, firing, and paying the PA.

C. Living arrangements

A wide variety of living arrangement was reported by respondents, with the following being the most common (in ascending order): with a spouse or relative, alone with no paid support, or in a supervised living arrangement.

- Those who worked in the past were most likely to live alone with no paid support.
- Current workers were most likely to live in a supervised living apartment or a group home.
- Very few respondents had a live-in paid assistant.
- Most respondents found their neighborhood was safe, have easy access to a grocery store, do not need more privacy at home, and are friends with at least one neighbor.
- A greater percentage of nonworking respondents needed assistive devices or modifications at home than current workers.

D. Transportation

A wide variety of transportation difficulties was reported by respondents, including problems of availability, accessibility, needing someone to drive, lift van access, cost, or lack of personal car. Only half of respondents had easy access to public transportation. Respondents who never worked had the most transportation obstacles, including needing someone to drive, lack of available transportation, and limited travel destinations provided by group transportation.

E. Disability, health, and assistance needed

Disability status was ascertained by self-report using five categories: physical, intellectual, mental illness, hearing, or vision. Among all respondents who were of working age, two-thirds had physical disabilities, forty percent reported intellectual disabilities, and one-quarter had mental illness disabilities (responses not mutually exclusive). The great majority of those not currently working reported a physical disability, while fewer than half of current workers reported this disability. A much greater percentage of those currently working reported an intellectual disability than nonworking respondents. Significantly fewer respondents in any employment status had either a hearing or vision disability.

Past workers had a later onset of disability, and correspondingly a greater percentage of past workers worked before they became disabled. They also reported the poorest health. The majority of both those currently working and those who never worked reported themselves in excellent or good health, compared with only one-third of those who worked in the past.

Approximately half of all respondents needed help from another person with personal care in the home, whether or not they were currently receiving such assistance. A majority of those not working required this assistance, compared with only a minority of current workers.

F. Demographics

The average respondent was female (52% of respondents), Caucasian (86% of respondents), age 47, a high school graduate, and never married (56% of respondents). Overall, past workers were older (58 years) than either current workers (42 years) or those who never worked (53 years). More of those currently working were male, while two-thirds of those who worked in the past were female. Those who had never worked were significantly more likely to have stopped school before completing high school.

Most of the respondents lived on very little income. Over half of respondents indicated that their total family income before taxes was under \$10,000 a year, while another third had a pre-tax total income of \$10,000 to less than \$25,000 a year. When financial difficulties were assessed, those who had worked in the past had more trouble paying for most items than either the current working participants or those who had never worked. This included paying for rent or mortgage, utilities, credit card debts, car or van expenses, medical care, and food. With the exception of utilities, those who never worked or were currently working had fewer financial difficulties.

V. Employer Survey

Connecticut employers are a key part of the equation for successful employment of people with disabilities. In an effort to reach more employers and obtain more quantitative information, the Steering Committee partnered with four Chambers of Commerce across the state to send out a mail survey. A total of 653 surveys were analyzed from the following four Chambers of Commerce: Chamber of Commerce of Northwest Connecticut, Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, and Bridgeport Regional Business Council. Respondents to the survey had businesses located in 145 different zip codes across Connecticut.

Over half of respondents reported they are CEO/CFO/business owners. The most common types of businesses represented were retail/sales, manufacturing/industry, financial, health care, and education. One-third of respondents were from companies reporting fewer than ten employees, and one-quarter from companies with ten to forty-nine employees. Some of the more salient results of the survey are reported below.

Experience employing people with disabilities

Employers could see people with disabilities working most often at lower skilled or entry level positions, such as secretarial or administrative support or entry level/unskilled work. However, over 40% felt jobs such as managerial, professional, or sales positions could also be filled by people with disabilities.

Employer barriers to hiring people with disabilities

Numerous barriers were offered by employers in response to an open-ended question regarding barriers to hiring people with disabilities. As with the employers in the focus groups, many of these employers' comments related only to physical disabilities, such as being in a wheelchair, or to intellectual disabilities. This was very apparent from the accommodations barriers listed – many related to accessibility accommodations for people with physical disabilities, including the cost to make such accommodations. Challenges related to finding skilled employees focused not only on physical disabilities, but those traditionally associated with intellectual disabilities as well, with an emphasis on needing employees with “skill sets,” “coordination,” and “mental abilities.” In addition, about half of the financial barriers referred to costs traditionally associated with intellectual disabilities, such as needing extra supervision or training. Other financial concerns also echoed those given by the focus group employers, such as concerns about increased health care costs and reduced productivity. Interestingly, liability issues were not as emphasized by these employers, although those mentioned paralleled those of the focus group participants, such as fear of lawsuits or of complying with unknown laws.

When grouped into themes, the barriers written in the employer mail survey reiterated most of the employer concerns from the focus groups. The following barriers are listed in ascending order, from most to least frequently mentioned.

- Preconceptions, assumptions, fear of the unknown
- Accommodation concerns
- Need for skilled and qualified employees
- Financial and productivity concerns
- Liability issues

- Customer reactions
- Transportation concerns

Accommodations

Opinions concerning accommodations and how easy or difficult each would be for their company to provide were also assessed. Providing assistive technology and physical modifications along with shifting an employee's hours were considered the easiest accommodations to supply. However, changing an employee's job tasks or allowing them to work at home was considered much more difficult to offer, and providing a person to assist with job related activities was considered the most difficult accommodation to make. However, even though physical modifications were considered by employers the easiest to accommodate, only one-quarter of employers indicated their company would definitely hire more people with disabilities if funds were provided for accommodations.

Influence of size of business

There was a clear and strong relationship between company size and several variables, including jobs people with disabilities could hold, ease of providing modifications, the impact of financial incentives on hiring, encouragement of applications, productivity concerns, positions available for people with disabilities, and attitudes. It is unclear whether this difference is primarily motivated by attitude, experience, or lack of available positions within respondent businesses.

Attitudes

Respondents reported conflicting and somewhat negative opinions about the presence of persons with disabilities in the workplace environment.

- 71% agreed that employers are reluctant to hire people with known disabilities
- 50% felt that the cost of accommodations is "too expensive"
- 50% reported that people with disabilities would have difficulty performing the jobs available at their companies
- 44% agreed they might be sued over not providing accommodations

Consistently confusing is a lack of response congruence. While the majority of all respondents believed that the benefits of hiring a person with disabilities outweighs the costs, the majority believed that work productivity would decrease, time off would be greater, accommodations would be expensive, and law suits would increase. On a more positive note, virtually all employers (90%) would hire more people with disabilities if the person had the skills and experience needed for the job.

VI. State Agency Employment Processes

To complement this work, an analysis was completed of four Connecticut agencies which serve people with disabilities: the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and Department of Mental Retardation. Through interviews with key employees, an overview of the employment

process for each agency was created. Areas of interest included eligibility requirements, services provided, process gaps, outcome measures, employment and career support, agency follow up, system barriers, and suggestions for improvement.

VII. Discussion

Over 1,600 individuals provided information for the Connecticut MIG needs assessment. Focus groups, key informant interviews, surveys, telephone and in-person interviews, and informal discussions served as the primary vehicles for the acquisition of knowledge relevant to the employment of people with disabilities and older adults in Connecticut. With guidance from the published literature and a diverse and committed group of Steering Committee members, the research team designed a series of data collection instruments aimed at obtaining information from various informants. Interested parties included but were not limited to:

- People with disabilities of all ages
- Active and potential employers from across the state
- Parents and advocates
- Vocational counselors, benefits specialists, transition coordinators, and other service providers
- Program directors
- Policy makers

Results indicated a number of barriers in the system, impacting employers in addition to current and potential employees. The typical employee with disabilities in Connecticut works part-time, earns less than \$8 per hour, has a desire to increase hours, and reports an intellectual disability. Individuals who reported that they no longer work because of a disability tended to be older than current workers, report that the primary disability is physical in nature, worked full-time and earned substantially more than those currently employed prior to being disabled. In general, current and past workers reported a high level of job satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents wanted additional personal assistance support, which was most heavily endorsed by those who reported that they have never worked and by those who worked in the past. When presented with a hypothetical situation, three-fourths of all respondents said they would want assistance with hiring and managing a PA.

A number of system-wide strengths and weaknesses were identified that will be capitalized on as the project moves forward. Participants all agreed that the existing community-based programs or state agencies are successful in assisting people with disabilities to find employment at least some of the time. This included BRS, BESB, DMR, DOL, the Connect to Work program, and mental health providers. Often, however, it was certain components of the programs that were successful, or even some individual at the agency who is really making it work. Strengths of the existing system include job training, supported employment, and vocational services such as career and benefits counseling. An additional strength was the identification and commitment of 16 program partners in the state. All are poised to collaborate with the MIG project.

Weaknesses in the system identified by participants include the time limited nature of supports, lack of funding, understaffing, gaps in the system, not enough interagency collaboration, and lack of public transportation. Other system barriers include no long term support for people with disabilities, lack of continuity of support for people in the system, and difficulty individualizing

supports. One barrier mentioned repeatedly was the risk that people with disabilities have in losing their benefits if they make over the allowed income amount. In addition, many participants suggested there is not enough creativity and that people should be more innovative in their ideas.

Next steps

Between the time that the research was completed and the time this report was finalized, the Steering Committee and other stakeholders have taken the planning process a step further. The barriers identified in the needs assessment were considered and prioritized at an Employment Summit in June, 2006. They are now incorporated into Connecticut's employment strategic plan.

The next step in the strategic planning process is the design and implementation of initiatives with the intended purpose of improving the employment of persons with disabilities. Each individual initiative will have a target audience, process measures, and intended goals. The role of the research team will be to design and implement a detailed evaluation strategy with a focus on process, consumer satisfaction, changes in employment status and cost-benefits. To ensure a closed loop process, the continued role of the research team is to assess whether the plan meets the needs of our stakeholders: individuals with disabilities and employers.

Mirroring the strategic planning process, an array of stakeholders including people with disabilities, providers, employers, employees, and family members will be called upon to evaluate the various programs and projects. The proposed goal is to contact 100% of all future MIG participants using myriad methods: mail survey, telephone interview, or focus group. Connecticut will use these initiatives to provide opportunities for the successful employment of all people with disabilities.

Complete citations for referenced articles are included in the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment Final Report.