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CONNECTICUT LAUNCHING GROUND-BREAKING EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

New Connect-Ability Initiative Emphasizes ‘Seeing the Ability’ as Workers Bring Skills and Resourcefulness to Job

HARTFORD, CT (June 27, 2007) – Hundreds of employers, workers and advocates from government and business witnessed the launch of the state’s innovative new ‘Connect-Ability’ initiative -- aimed at opening employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The initiative debuted at the second annual Employment Summit, held at the Connecticut Convention Center.

One of the first initiatives of its kind in the nation, Connect-Ability focuses on ability, not disability. The initiative will connect employers and able employees who have disabilities through a statewide education and media campaign, comprehensive online resources at www.Connect-Ability.com, and a host of community-based initiatives.

“Connecticut’s economic vitality is fueled by outstanding employers and a workforce that is second to none,” Governor M. Jodi Rell said. “More and more, our employers are recognizing that the individual qualities of workers, regardless of whether they have a disability, are key to a successful business. Helping everyone to ‘see the ability’ in current or prospective employees is the theme of the Connect-Ability initiative. The overall goal is to strengthen Connecticut’s business and jobs climate even further by bringing employers together with highly motivated, highly skilled workers who will not let anything get in the way of their success.”

State Social Services Commissioner Michael P. Starkowski, whose agency is administering the Connect-Ability initiative, said Connecticut has exemplary, homegrown role models for success in the workplace. “The public awareness campaign shows real Connecticut people and real Connecticut businesses, ranging from a self-employed trucker to a senior systems administrator at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy,” Commissioner Starkowski said. “These individuals are raising the bar of achievement and shaping the way we all should see the abilities of our Connecticut residents.”

Research conducted by the University of Connecticut and participants at last year's Employment Summit provided insights to help shape the Connect-Ability initiative. This year's Summit is an opportunity for stakeholders to review the progress made and provide additional input.

"Connect-Ability began as a federal grant, but its success depends on the how well we can work together in a public/private partnership," said Brenda Moore, director of the Department of Social Services' Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. "We're eager to share our progress and hope everyone will agree that our name – Connect-Ability – goes to the heart of the program's purpose: to facilitate connections between employers and able employees and focus on the ability, not the disability."

Both employers and people with disabilities can learn more about how the program can help them via a new website, www.Connect-Ability.com launched today. The site organizes and centralizes information and resources in an accessible, universally user-friendly format, making it easy to use with screen readers, voice activation and other assistive technology. The site features professionally-filmed vignettes featuring six Connecticut workers and how they are thriving in the careers of their choice.

People with disabilities thinking about job and career options can visit the new online Career Center to find a vast array of information about skill assessment, gaining experience, the job search, interviewing, benefits and getting help on the job. The site will help employers expand their search for workers and make it easy to integrate people with disabilities into their workforce.

The communications campaign centers on Connecticut people and employers who have not let a disability prevent job success. Stories of a stroke survivor working as a laboratory biologist, a trucker who drives without the use of his legs, an auto tech with a different way of learning, among others, are told through videos, television, radio and print messages, which will be unveiled at the Employment Summit.

The public service campaign, tagged "See the Ability," begins appearing throughout the state this week. The DSS Bureau of Rehabilitation Services created the campaign with Mintz & Hoke Communications Group (Avon). "The goal," says Chris Knopf, Mintz & Hoke chairman and executive creative director, "is to open people's minds to the idea that hiring people with disabilities brings a host of benefits to any

organization. We're showing Connecticut how it all starts by seeing people for their abilities first."

Connect-Ability is collaborating with Connecticut Public Television to continue this year's Emmy award-winning series, *Able Lives Incorporated* to extend the reach of the communications program and help educate Connecticut residents. The program begins airing in fall 2007. Those attending the Summit will have a sneak preview of the first episode, which features a wide variety of employers and employees with a range of disabilities and illustrates how integral they are to Connecticut's dynamic and diverse work environment.

Connect-Ability is funded by a \$5.1 million Medicaid Infrastructure Grant awarded to Connecticut by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The state Department of Social Services has been administering the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant program since 2001 but, until now, has focused mainly on helping working people with disabilities with access to health care and personal care assistance. The new grant results from a year-long public planning effort that will guide the agency in tackling employment issues from a much broader perspective.

The plan encompasses both state and community-level initiatives, and seeks to increase the employment rate and earnings of Connecticut citizens with disabilities.

Besides employers, effort will focus on young adults moving from school to post-secondary education or employment, raising the career potential of people with disabilities who are already working, and helping people overcome barriers to get started in the job market.

About the Employment Summit 2007

Building on the 2006 Summit called to gather stakeholders from throughout Connecticut to share opinions, impressions and ideas for the federal Medicare & Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, The Employment Summit 2007 functions as a launch, update and opportunity for further input.

Quincy Abbot, steering committee co-chair of Connect-Ability, will provide the opening address and emcee the session. Prior to joining the committee, Abbot served as chairman and president of the Arc of Connecticut, founding chairman of the Board of the Corporation for Independent Living, chairman of the Connecticut Corporation for Supported Employment and also served for six years as the chairman of the Connecticut

Governor's Council on Mental Retardation. Commissioner Starkowski of the Department of Social Services and Connect-Ability program manager Amy Porter will highlight progress made since last year's Summit and outline the vision and goals for the next four years.

Randy Snow, a Fortune 500 speaker and one of the most successful gold medal wheelchair athletes in history, will be a featured speaker. Snow was injured in a farming accident at the peak of a blossoming tennis career while just a junior in high school. Since that time he had dedicated his life to discovering options and finding new opportunities. Today he is the only athlete in history to compete in three different Paralympic Games (London, Barcelona and Atlanta) in three different sports and win medals in each. Because of his achievements, he received the Paralympic torch from President Clinton, kicking off the Atlanta Paralympic Games in 1996.

About Connect-Ability:

Connect-Ability is an initiative connecting Connecticut employers with the state's talent pool of people with disabilities. Connect-Ability will open minds by helping employers see the ability, not the disability. The initiative will bring together more resources than ever to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Addressing the fundamental barriers to employment, it is one of the first initiatives of its kind in the nation and a model for other states planning similar efforts. Connect-Ability is funded by a four-year federal grant from the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and managed by the Connecticut Department of Social Services. Visit at www.Connect-Ability.com or call toll-free 1-866-844-1903.

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