

L EGISLATIVE REPORT

Media/Outreach Campaign Strategies for Employment of Individuals with Disabilities in Maine

*Report prepared in response to
Chapter 570, H.P. 1351-L.D. 1910:
"An Act to Create Employment Opportunities
for People with Disabilities," Part C*

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MAINE
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Purpose of this Report

Envision a future in which all Maine residents can achieve the increased quality of life that comes with the opportunity to work, build careers and contribute to Maine’s workforce; and a future in which all Maine employers have access to a competitive labor pool of skilled and reliable workers. Public Law 570, “An Act To Create Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities,” is one step toward realizing this vision. The law addresses barriers to maximizing the employment of people with disabilities.

This report is in response to Part C of P.L 570. It contains recommendations about resources and next steps regarding the development and implementation of a media outreach campaign that increases awareness and promotes the employment of Maine residents with disabilities.

Growing Interest

Expanding work opportunities for people with disabilities has been getting a lot of attention both locally and nationally. States across the country are creating media outreach campaigns to educate employers and the public about the unrealized potential of a workforce inclusive of people with disabilities.

Here in Maine, representatives of the public and private sectors, not-for-profit organizations, people with disabilities and their advocates came together to create *Working Together: Maine’s Strategic Plan to Maximize Employment for People with Disabilities*.¹ The implementation of this plan began last year and continues to gather momentum. Two important findings from the extensive research behind this strategic plan are 1) the need to address employers’ concerns and misunderstandings about hiring workers with disabilities, and 2) the need to create opportunities for businesses to share information with each other about their experiences employing workers with disabilities.

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A Solution to Maine’s Projected Workforce Shortage

Removing job barriers to people with disabilities is a goal that has been inspiring widespread buy-in from all sectors. One reason for this is that Maine is projected to face a workforce shortage in the near future. With Baby Boomers beginning to retire in a few years, no substantial growth in the labor force is expected for the next two decades. Maine is facing the prospect of having more jobs than there are workers to fill them.

¹ Working Together, in full and abridged, can be found at <http://www.choicesceo.org/stratplan.htm>

The National Association of Manufacturers forecasts a deficit of 5.3 million workers in the U.S. by 2010 and 14 million by 2020.² Maine's workforce will be particularly affected. The number of Maine residents 55-years-and-older is expected to increase 31 percent by 2015, while the 16-to-29-year-olds are projected to decline seven percent, contributing to an overall 4.7 percent decline in the 16-to-55 population.³ Giving more people with disabilities an opportunity to enter the workforce is a win-win proposition for the state.

Employers at the Forefront of Change

James T. Brett and William E. Kiernan, of the New England Council and the Institute for Community Inclusion, report that with these troubling population shifts and the advances in assistive technology, people with disabilities are an "untapped resource of potential workers." Yet today, only 38 percent of Mainers with disabilities are employed and over half are living at the poverty level or below. Moreover, only one in every eight Maine businesses employs a worker with a disability. A 2005 report found that over half of Maine employers participating in focus groups and surveys reported that they did not think that someone with a disability could do the job.⁴

The report also found that while fewer than nine percent of businesses with under 19 employees employed a worker with a disability, more than a third of businesses with 20 or more employees did so. Larger businesses with human resource departments have the information and means to maximize the employment of underutilized workers, such as those with disabilities. Thus, a particular concern for Maine is that small businesses, which make up the majority of Maine employers, have access to accurate information, particularly about the successes that larger businesses have had.

The report concluded that to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities "nothing matters more than changing employer attitudes." As long as half of employers think that people with disabilities cannot perform the work high unemployment levels among people with disabilities will persist. Public Law 570 addresses the need to reach out to employers in both the public and private sectors.

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² "The Worker in N.E.'s Future," *New York Times*, James T. Brett and William E. Kiernan, November 15, 2004.

³ "The Projected Population and Labor Force Outlook for the 55 and Older Population in Maine, 2005-2015," Center for Labor Market Studies Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, November 15, 2006.

⁴ "Employer Practices and Attitudes," November 2005, Planning Decisions Inc. http://choices.muskie.usm.maine.edu/ProductsEvents/emp_practices.doc

What Needs to Happen

More than anything, what stands between employers and their potential employees with disabilities is information.

- *Information about the capabilities of workers with disabilities.* Ninety percent of workers with disabilities are rated “average” or “above average” for performance in a 35-year-long study by the Dupont Corporation.
- *Information about the true expense of accommodations.* Only one-in-four employees with disabilities need accommodations. In instances where accommodations are required, half cost less than \$500 and 19 percent cost nothing at all.
- *Information about insurance costs.* Workers’ compensation insurance rates are based only on a business’ accident history, not whether employees have disabilities.

While employers are the primary audience of this effort, there is also a need to reach out to people with disabilities to encourage them to apply for more jobs, as well as to potential co-workers of people with disabilities to ensure an accepting environment.

Given the scope of need, there is a tendency to rush into a solution. P.L. 570 mentions some methods to reach employers, but these may or may not be the ideal methods. In a crowded marketplace our message will be competing with many others. We need to know the best, most cost effective ways to reach employers. We need to craft messages that meet the information needs of Maine’s employers. We need to understand, and most importantly, involve our primary audience before we consider the activities proposed in P.L. 570.

We propose the creation of a high-level Public and Private Sector Task Group that will oversee the development of a marketing plan by marketing professionals. We need to engage the services of professionals who have experience with traditional and alternative media, who understand marketing communications and who can help the Public and Private Sector Task Group use an array of marketing tools, such as strategic planning, video and Web production, event planning and promotion, and graphic design. By conducting market research and focus group facilitation, the marketing company will develop a campaign message and budget.

A Public-Private Partnership

A successful employer outreach campaign will include the time and leadership of people representing various interests, Maine employers in particular. We believe employers know best what would work to create change in employment practices. That is why we propose that the Public and Private Sector Task Group be led by an employer.

We envision additional members coming from government, other public and private sector employers, and people with disabilities and their advocates. The task group members will meet not more than four times in one year. They will guide and approve the work of the marketing firm as a professional strategic marketing plan is developed. This plan will seek to both raise awareness and effect behavioral change. Measurements of success will be built into the process.

Moreover, with the full engagement and leadership of Maine employers, we anticipate a greatly increased interest on the part of employers to contribute financially to the implementation of the marketing plan.

Estimated Cost

We have gathered information on the estimated costs of developing a strategic marketing plan from a Maine firm. It is expected that a professional marketing campaign that includes quality Maine-based research, fully developed messages and associated graphics and a detailed and realistic budget will cost \$59,000. This figure is broken down as follows:

- The marketing firm will prepare detailed presentations for the task group of their findings and proposals. The firm will tap the expertise of the group's members and take strategic direction from them. Follow-up work will also be completed. It is estimated that the cost of these meetings will be \$9,000.
- A campaign message with supporting graphics will be developed for an estimated \$5000.
- A research firm will be engaged to test messages and assess public and employer opinions for an estimated \$10,000.
- Creative elements will be developed, once research has been completed. These might include: slogans, print ads, animated television commercial storyboards, brochures, and radio commercial scripts. The estimated cost is \$5,000.
- Focus group research on reactions to proposed products and messages will be done informally within companies participating in the Public and Private Sector Task Group for an estimated \$5,000.
- A complete campaign budget and recommendations for maximizing impact under variable funding will be developed. It will include budgeting for an initial awareness campaign, a "take action" campaign, and a maintenance campaign for an estimated \$25,000.

When finished, the marketing plan would be submitted for review and discussion to the Commission on Disability and Employment, the Maine Jobs Council, and the Departments of Labor and Economic and Community Development. With the leadership, support and input from such a wide array of stakeholders, it is expected that the plan would likely garner private-sector financial support.

We appreciate your time and consideration of a matter of great importance to Maine residents with disabilities, Maine employers and the future of Maine's workforce. We would be happy to provide additional information on this proposal and offer examples of the work that is being done in other states.