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A Partnership of:

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services,
The Maine Department of Labor, The Maine Jobs Council, and
The Maine Commission on Disability and Employment

Working Together:

Maine's Strategic
Plan to Maximize
Employment for
People with
Disabilities



“Maine invests in all people to ensure that our state has the healthy, educated workforce it needs to build a strong economy. We are working with youth and adults with disabilities so they can improve their skills and get good jobs, and meet the workforce needs of employers both today and in the future. Working together, we can improve the employment and economic potential of all Mainers with disabilities.”

—Governor John E. Baldacci

Abridged Report: For full report go to: www.choicesceo.org/stratplan.htm



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This document is also available on the Internet, in several formats at <http://www.choicesceo.org/stratplan.htm>

Available in alternative formats upon request.

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Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary.....	4
II. A Vision for the Future	6
III. What was Learned	7
IV. Recommended Actions	9
V. Moving Maine's Strategic Plan Forward.....	11
VI. Contributors and Acknowledgements.....	14

A Note about the Shortened Version of Working Together: Maine's Strategic Plan to Maximize Employment for Workers with Disabilities: This version of "Working Together" contains just enough information for readers to get a sense of what the plan covers.

A full version is available on the Internet at:
<http://www.choicesceo.org/stratplan.htm>, by calling (207) 228-8031, or toll-free TTY 1-866-783-6461.

This plan is inspired by the stories of Maine citizens with disabilities who seek the increased quality of life that comes with the opportunity to work, build careers and contribute to the workforce.



I. Executive Summary:

Maine's Strategic Plan to Maximize Employment for People with Disabilities

Solving a complex problem with limited resources requires thoughtful planning. Beginning in early 2005, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Labor worked with a coalition from the public and private sectors to recommend steps to support people with disabilities who work, or who wish to work. This plan is the product of that effort.

This plan is inspired by the stories of Maine citizens with disabilities who seek the increased quality of life that comes with the opportunity to work, build careers and contribute to the workforce. And by the stories of Maine employers who are in need of skilled and reliable workers to compete, yet have had mixed success in recruiting and retaining workers with disabilities.

Recently, there have been positive developments for people with disabilities who want to work. More students with disabilities are graduating from high school and going on to college. New technology has expanded the jobs workers with disabilities can perform. New global markets, a growing service sector, and the aging of Maine's workforce has heightened employers' demands for skilled workers.

Despite these developments, the number of workers with disabilities is not increasing. Through extensive research that included conversations with employers, people with disabilities, and service organizations, actions to increase this number were developed. For each of these action areas, information on resources, opportunities, and short- and long-term activities are identified in the full report. Following are the six actions identified as top priorities for 2006 and beyond:

Because strategic system improvement is an ongoing and continuous effort, interested employers, organizations and individuals are encouraged to take part.

1. Create an employer outreach and education plan.
2. Ensure that Maine state government is a model employer for people with disabilities.
3. Better support young people with disabilities who are transitioning from school to work.
4. Improve and expand vocational rehabilitation services.
5. Expand benefits counseling to people with disabilities who work, or who want to work.
6. Enhance data collection about workers with disabilities and ensure that data can be shared by relevant agencies providing services.

The Commission on Disability and Employment will lead the implementation of this plan, with assistance from coalition partners. Because strategic system improvement is an ongoing and continuous effort, interested employers, organizations and individuals are encouraged to take part.

Successful implementation will also require the commitment of key leaders; therefore, the Commission, and the others engaged with this plan, invite the Governor, the Maine State Legislature, the Workforce Cabinet, and all state agency managers and staff to join in its implementation. People with disabilities and Maine's employers have much to gain in the coming months and years from these efforts.

In developing this plan, information was gathered from a wide variety of sources: people with disabilities, employers, service providers, others . . . This information was analyzed and the results were compiled into common “themes.”



II. A Vision of the Future

All strategic plans are guided by a vision of a better future. Below is the vision that guided the recommendations of this plan.

- People with disabilities have jobs that meet their economic and personal needs.
- Everyone, regardless of disability, has the opportunity to work. Everyone has the right to fair treatment and support in exercising that opportunity.
- There is widespread community expectation that people with disabilities will participate in the labor force to the maximum extent possible.
- Schools provide career orientation for all students, regardless of disability. Orientation begins in middle school. Students in high school have options for workplace learning, including job shadowing, internships, cooperative learning, and similar experiences.
- There is a seamless transition from high school to college. The rate of students with disabilities completing high school is the same as for youth without disabilities. Enrollment of Maine high school graduates with disabilities increases in Maine community colleges, and in public and private universities.
- Educational and employment support services provide a high quality workforce for Maine employers; consequently, employers find Maine an increasingly attractive place to do business.

Stakeholders — those that have an interest in the topic of employment and people with disabilities — voted on what themes to prioritize and make part of the action plan. It's these recommendation areas, and ideas for how to move forward, that comprise this strategic plan

- All career services providers serve workers with disabilities. Employment choices, and resulting services, are based on personal interests, skills and needs. Career services are flexible enough do “whatever it takes” to achieve successful employment outcomes.
- Referral to more traditional services for workers with disabilities, such as Maine’s Vocational Rehabilitation services, is done only when there is agreement between the person with a disability and service providers that this is the best option.
- There are a variety of options that allow workers with disabilities to obtain adequate and affordable health insurance for themselves and their families regardless of disability type or income level.
- Public and private transportation options are available to both workers with and without disabilities.

III. What Was Learned

In developing this plan, information was gathered from a wide variety of sources: people with disabilities, employers, service providers, others. Focus groups were held. Surveys were taken. Interviews were conducted. This information was analyzed and the results were compiled into common “themes.” Stakeholders — those that have an interest in the topic of employment and people with disabilities — voted on what themes to prioritize and make part of the action plan. Finally, resources and actions that could be applied to meet these priorities were recommended. It's these recommendation areas, and ideas for how to move forward, that comprise this strategic plan.

In 2006, action will begin on six priority areas under the leadership of the Commission on Disability and Employment. The other three strategic plan partners—the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and the Maine Jobs Council—will also be thoroughly engaged.

Eight key themes emerged:

1. Workers with disabilities face many of the same challenges as workers without disabilities. These challenges include lack of jobs, training and reliable transportation to jobs.
2. Employers have many concerns about employing people with disabilities, but many employers have been able to address these concerns. These employers have had a positive and profitable experience with workers with disabilities. Businesses and the public sector must work together to address legal and other concerns regarding workers with disabilities.
3. Disability service providers that approach employers as business partners, with business-type strategies, have better success.
4. Economic disincentives, real or perceived, play an important role in whether a person seeks employment, and whether they are successful in employment. Many disincentives are still present, including some income support programs which were intended, until recently, to discourage or even punish efforts by people with disabilities to work.
5. Vocational services for people with disabilities are facing big challenges. These challenges include waiting lists of up to one year for Vocational Rehabilitation services and a focus on initial job placement with only short-term follow-up.
6. Some disability groups, such as individuals with mental illness, youth with severe disabilities and individuals with developmental disabilities face greater challenges to employment. These challenges are made more difficult when services do not connect well across different systems — such as when youth move from schools to adult service systems, or when some key service areas do not provide, or even allow, funds to be spent to support employment outcomes.
7. There are some promising practices that can be better used, including the Workers with Disabilities Option of MaineCare, which allows a person with a disability to earn more in a job without the risk of losing their health insurance.
8. There are also some significant challenges, such as the lack of a business-to-business resource that addresses disability issues and builds on proven business practice.

Activities will involve many people and organizations representing key constituencies. Interested employers, organizations and individuals are also encouraged to join the effort.

IV. Recommended Actions

In 2006, action will begin on six priority areas under the leadership of the Commission on Disability and Employment. The other three strategic plan partners — the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and the Maine Jobs Council — will also be thoroughly engaged. Activities will involve many people and organizations representing key constituencies. Interested employers, organizations and individuals are also encouraged to join the effort.

For each of the six priorities, preliminary details about needs, resources, short-term activities and results, and long term sustainability are described in the full report. In this brief version only short summaries are listed:

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1:

Create an employer outreach and education plan.

Summary: Information needs to be provided to employers about the value of hiring people with disabilities, existing resources employers can use to make accommodations, the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and liability issues. Large and small employers and service providers will be involved in the creation of promotional materials, a one-stop source of accurate information, and a plan to create a statewide business-led promotional and networking group.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2:

Ensure that Maine state government is a model employer for people with disabilities.

Summary: State government can serve as an example and a resource to other employers. Current policies that would help state government employ more workers with disabilities need to be better used. The Maine Jobs Council will formally recommend that the Governor

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issue an executive order that makes the employment of people with disabilities a priority for state government. A training curriculum for managers and staff will be developed. Information on best practices and resources to support the employment of people with disabilities will be collected and made available. The success that the state government shows from these efforts will be shared with private sector businesses.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3:

Post-secondary Education and Employment Services for Youth Transitioning from School to Work

Summary: Funding and provision of services to youth who are transitioning from school to work needs to be examined to ensure that resources are being spent in the most effective way. A task force will be created to examine the issue in full, hold a one-day forum for interested stakeholders, and develop a strategic plan for improvements.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4:

Improvement of Vocational Rehabilitation Service System

Summary: Workers with disabilities prosper with quality Vocational Rehabilitation services that are provided in a timely manner. The Department of Labor and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services will work to make internal improvements. The Maine Jobs Council and others will work to support these efforts. A consumer satisfaction survey and a needs assessment will be conducted. A document about Vocational Rehabilitation that is targeted to people with disabilities will be developed.

Strategic Priority 5:

Benefits Counseling System Development

Summary: Additional benefits counselors will offer detailed benefits plans to more people with disabilities. This will allow more workers with disabilities to make quick and informed decisions regarding job offers and advancement.

Maine’s Commission on Disability and Employment—the group primarily responsible for this strategic plan—is the lead group for promoting, implementing, and monitoring this plan as it moves forward.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 6:

Enhance data collection about workers with disabilities and ensure that data can be shared by relevant agencies providing services.

Summary: There is a need for better and more consistent information about workers with disabilities. A working group will be formed to address this issue. The group will gather data from the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services regarding wages of workers enrolled, or formally enrolled, in the MaineCare Workers with Disabilities Option. Based on the plan developed by this group, executive and/or legislative action will be recommended, and inter-agency data sharing agreements will be developed.

V. Moving Maine’s Strategic Plan Forward

LEADERSHIP: Who oversees the plan?

Maine’s Commission on Disability and Employment — the group primarily responsible for this strategic plan — is the lead group for promoting, implementing, and monitoring this plan as it moves forward. The role of this group in “owning” this plan is entirely consistent with its role as defined in Maine law.

In implementing this plan, the Commission will work closely with its parent group, the Maine Jobs Council, which is the designated workforce development advisory body in Maine.

An important asset that the Maine Jobs Council brings to the implementation of this strategic plan is its relationship to Maine’s Workforce Cabinet. The Cabinet is chaired by the Commissioner of Department of Labor. Its membership includes the Commissioners of Education and Economic and Community Development, the Chancellor of the University of Maine System, and the President of the Maine Community College System. The Maine Jobs

Continued engagement of stakeholders — especially people with disabilities and employers — is imperative for success.



Council recommends state workforce development policies to the Workforce Cabinet for their consideration, and it is expected that many activities within the implementation of this strategic plan will follow this procedure.

ENGAGEMENT: How do people become involved in implementing this plan?

Involvement of a wide array of stakeholders was an important part of developing this strategic plan. That same commitment now extends to the implementation of the plan.

Continued engagement of stakeholders — especially people with disabilities and employers — is imperative for success. In the next year, approaches to engaging stakeholders will include the use of technology, and networking with existing groups. Assistive technology, distance learning, video conferencing and online discussions are effective communications methods that break down barriers of distance and access. Technology can also bridge geographic distance. Internet, listservs and an electronic and print newsletter that updates readers on activities and issues are being considered as methods to share information collected.

MEASURING PROGRESS

The goal of this strategic plan is to improve employment for people with disabilities in Maine. The Commission on Disability and Employment will track progress towards that goal by reporting on a set of high-level employment indicators each year. These indicators include:

- Employment participation of working-age adults with disabilities
- People with disabilities receiving intensive services from One-Stop Career Centers
- Employment rate of individuals on Supplemental Security Income
- Number of Bureau of Rehabilitation Services clients entering competitive employment

The goal of this strategic plan is to improve employment for people with disabilities in Maine. The Commission on Disability and Employment will track progress towards that goal by reporting on a set of high-level employment indicators each year.

These indicators will be reported by the Commission on Disability and Employment on an annual basis. Commission members are interested in identifying additional indicators of the economic well-being of people with disabilities. These may include the number of people in jobs that pay a living wage, who are looking for employment, and who are self-employed.

Because employment outcomes are affected by factors beyond the control of this project, these indicators, by themselves, are not adequate tools for measuring progress. For example, efforts to educate employers about the employability of people with disabilities in the next year could be tremendously effective, yet a downturn in the economy could mean that these efforts do not result in more people with disabilities getting jobs in the short-term. Progress in each of the priority areas will also be measured using a set of short- and intermediate-term indicators. In the case of employer outreach and education efforts, these intermediate outcomes include:

- Increase in the number of Maine employers who view people with disabilities as a potential source of skilled, productive workers.
- Increase in the number of employers who are aware of resources where they can obtain reliable information about providing accommodations to people with disabilities.

CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENTS

Finally, it will be important to celebrate the major achievements that result from the implementation of this plan. Doing so will:

- Recognize the vision and hard work of those who have made this plan a success;
- Ensure the impact of the changes are understood in very real human terms, by those involved in the work of this plan and the overall public; and
- Extend vision and hope to others.

The Commission on Disability and Employment is committed to celebrating achievements . . . the commission will host an annual forum to be held around a positive theme, and an annual excellence awards celebration.



The Commission on Disability and Employment is committed to celebrating achievements wherever possible. As an expression of this commitment, the Commission will host an annual forum to be held around a positive theme, and an annual excellence awards celebration.

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