

# **Working Together:**

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

**January 2006**

**A Partnership of:**

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

"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**



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**This document was prepared with support from the CHOICES CEO project, funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services through a grant to Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (grant #11-P-92409/1). The CHOICES CEO project is managed through a partnership involving the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor. All research and staff support is provided by the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. Views expressed do not represent official policy of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, or the University of Southern Maine.**

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

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

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# **I. Executive Summary –** ***Maine’s Strategic Plan to Maximize Employment for People with Disabilities***

This strategic plan is the result of one year of collaborative effort by individuals and organizations representing Maine’s public, private and educational sectors. But behind this plan are 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 Maine’s workforce. It is also about Maine employers who need skilled workers and a reliable workforce to be competitive in a global economy, and yet for various reasons have had mixed success in recruiting and retaining workers with disabilities.

Many positive developments can be identified in Maine’s current workforce climate, such as:

- More students with disabilities are graduating from high school and going on to college;
- New technological advances that increase the range of job functions that can be performed by workers with disabilities; and
- Increased demand for skilled workers that comes with the emergence of new global markets, from a growing service sector, and from the aging of Maine’s overall workforce.

Unfortunately, the aspirations and abilities of workers with disabilities and the workforce needs of Maine’s employers are not resulting in more people with disabilities working in Maine. Despite the size and complexity of some of these challenges, there are many success stories, examples of excellent practice, and good ideas for change to be found throughout Maine. It is from these pockets of excellence and proven practice that ideas and energy emerge that help to define how well-planned and executed change can make a real difference.

This strategic plan for Maine presents a vision of what can result from improvements in various public and private systems that support people with disabilities who wish to work. It identifies specific targeted action steps that can be taken to improve Maine’s workforce and the lives of many Mainers with disabilities and their families.

Work on this plan began in 2004, when the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was awarded a four-year grant from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to plan and take action that maximizes the involvement of people with disabilities in Maine’s workforce. To more effectively implement this project/plan, DHHS partnered with the Maine Department of Labor (DOL), and together they reached out to existing leadership groups committed to issues of employment and disability. Throughout 2005, employers, people with disabilities, educators, and organizations serving those with disabilities were contacted as part of the research and data collection behind this plan. These constituencies were reached through focus groups, surveys and interviews. The project also surveyed existing research and data as part of its exhaustive information gathering process.

Eight key themes emerged from this process:

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 to have a very positive and profitable experience with workers with disabilities. Businesses and public sector service systems 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 those with mental illness, youth with severe disabilities and the developmentally disabled face greater challenges to employment. These challenges are made much 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 risking loss of health insurance.
8. There are also some significant challenges, such as the lack of a business-to-business resource which addresses disability issues by business and for other businesses, building on proven business practice.

After careful consideration of findings through consensus discussion and voting, six areas were determined to have the highest priority for action in 2006 and beyond. For each of these areas, available resources and opportunities are identified, together with recommended short- and long-term activities. These details for each of the six priority areas can be found in the full report.

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

In 2006, the Commission on Disability and Employment will lead the implementation of this plan, with assistance from the other three strategic plan development partners as needed. Successful implementation requires the commitment of key leaders; therefore, the Commission, and the others engaged with this plan, invite the Governor, the leadership and membership of 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.

## II. Contributors and Acknowledgements

### Key contributors to this strategic plan:

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## **Acknowledgment of other contributions:**

While it would be difficult to identify all who made contributions to this strategic plan, the project partners and staff would also like to acknowledge the following people and organizations for their time and effort:

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Staff of the National Coalition for Health Systems Development (NCHSD), who provided very timely and helpful technical assistance to this effort, including Barbara Otto, Melissa Turner, Peter Baird, Joe Entwistle, and Sara Salley

### III. Introduction

Successfully solving a large and complex problem with limited resources requires thoughtful planning. The scope of the issues addressed in this effort thus requires a great breadth in terms of both information collected and the depth of the analysis. 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 possible 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.

To address this huge issue, Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services and its Department of Labor worked in partnership, starting in early 2005, with a broad-based coalition to recommend steps that Maine can take to better support people with disabilities who work, or who wish to work. This plan is the product of that effort.

Three leadership groups worked together to define the problem and collect in-depth information that was then used to develop this plan. Two of these, **Maine’s Commission on Disability and Employment** and the **Maine Jobs Council** are the legal authorities to undertake strategic planning and to recommend action steps for systems improvement in Maine. A third group, the **CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership Group** was created in 2005 to provide additional connections with key stakeholders and to provide added strategic planning leadership for the CHOICES CEO project<sup>1</sup>.

More detail on the role and function of each of these three groups is provided later in Section VII.

While there are many approaches to strategic planning, this plan was developed using “Action Research.” Action Research is based in the democratic participation of all stakeholders, and in the continual review of progress and consequent refinement of plans. The coalition that developed this plan strongly recommends action research be used throughout its implementation. For more information on both the Action Research model and this project’s experience using it, see Appendix D.

This report contains a lot of information; however, much more data was collected than could be presented in this report. In the interest of readability, only a sample of the data is described (though extensive data is provided in Appendix L for reader review). Furthermore, this plan may have missed some key points. Strategic planning is an ongoing and continuous effort, and interested readers are encouraged to become involved with the implementation of this plan. Should any reader wish to see more detailed data, offer additional information and insights, or

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<sup>1</sup> The CHOICEO CEO (Comprehensive Employment Opportunity) project provided support for the development of this strategic plan. The project is funded by a grant from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, which runs through 2008 to help Maine develop and implement a strategic plan to maximize employment of workers with disabilities. All research and development activities for this project are provided out of the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. For more information visit <http://www.choicesceo.org>

become involved in the work that will follow under this strategic plan, please contact project staff.

Finally, this report contains many technical terms, names and acronyms (initials that stand for a program name or phrase). Though writers have tried to reduce the use of these terms, they are often needed to describe the current system. A Glossary is provided in Appendix K of this report to help you understand these terms.

## **IV. A Vision of the Future**

**Strategic plans often involve a vision of what a comprehensive employment system would look like after the systems changes are made. Such a vision can serve as a comparison with the employment system that exists today. The vision as adopted, at least initially, by the Commission on Disability and Employment is described below.**

A workforce that includes people with disabilities who are employed in jobs which meet their economic and personal needs.

People with disabilities are valuable human resources. All persons, regardless of disability, have the opportunity to participate in the labor force and have the right to fair treatment and support in exercising that opportunity.

There is widespread community expectation that persons with disabilities can and will participate in the labor force to the maximum extent possible.

Schools have curricula that provide orientation to jobs and careers for all students, regardless of disability labels. This 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 community colleges and universities in Maine. The rate of individuals with disabilities completing high school is the same as for youth that do not have disabilities. Enrollment of Maine high school graduates with disabilities increases in Maine community colleges, and in public and private universities.

Local labor market (employer) needs are met. The educational systems and workforce support services provide a high quality workforce for Maine employers, who have stayed in Maine or perhaps relocated to Maine to take advantage of that high quality workforce.

All systems that provide employment and career services serve individuals with disabilities. There is no wrong door for entering the overall workforce system. An applicant's employment choices and resulting services and supports are based on his or her personal interests and needs. Each system uses planning tools that match a worker's interests, skills and support needs with appropriate employment and continuing education options. Each system is flexible enough to provide services and supports that facilitates "whatever it takes" to achieve successful employment outcomes.

Referral to more traditional services for workers with disabilities, such as Maine's vocational rehabilitation service system, is done only when there is agreement between the person with a disability and service planners/providers that such a referral is the best option.

There are a variety of options to allow workers with disabilities to obtain adequate and affordable health insurance for themselves and their families regardless of disability type, income level, or other factors.

There are a variety of public and private community transportation supports that workers with disabilities use, and these supports are the same as available to workers that have no disabilities.

## V. What Was Learned

### **The State of the State: Employment and Disability in Maine**

Recent declines in the employment and economic well-being of people with disabilities in Maine provide both a context and a renewed urgency for strategic planning efforts. In 2004, there were an estimated 118,000 working-age adults with disabilities living in Maine, representing 15.3 percent of all adults ages 21 to 64. The employment rate of working-age adults with disabilities did not change significantly between 2001 and 2004, hovering between 36 and 38 percent. Of even more concern, median household income among working age adults with disabilities dropped between 2003 and 2004, from \$33,200 to \$31,500, and the poverty rate rose from 20.9 percent to 28.2 percent.<sup>2</sup> That these negative trends occurred during a period of economic growth in Maine suggests that people with disabilities are increasingly dropping out or are being left out of Maine's economy.

Maine's economy strengthened between 2003 and 2004 by nearly every measure: payroll employment increased by 7,100 jobs, unemployment fell from 5.0 to 4.6 percent, personal income rose by 5.5 percent, and state general revenues increased by 12.2 percent.<sup>3</sup> The largest job gains were in education and health services and trade/transportation/utilities sectors. The future of the Maine economy is threatened by a population that is aging faster than the national average, low in-migration and low birth rates, all of which could ultimately result in labor shortages. Young adults, in particular, are leaving the state in large numbers. Between 1980 and 2000, Maine was a net exporter of approximately 50,000 young adults between 18 and 31 years of age.<sup>4</sup> With the right supports, workers with disabilities could help fill the labor vacuum left by retirees and youth out-migration.

There are several notable demographic characteristics among the population of people with disabilities in Maine that have implications for employment. First, adults with disabilities tend to have low levels of education relative to those without disabilities. A 2004 Census survey found that working age adults with disabilities were approximately three times more likely than those without disabilities to lack a high school diploma (18.7 percent versus 6.3 percent). At the other end of the educational spectrum, people with disabilities are about half as likely to have a college

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<sup>2</sup> Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics. (2005). 2004 Disability Status Reports: Maine. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

<sup>3</sup> Maine State Planning Office. (March 2005). The Maine Economy: Year-End Review and Outlook, 2004. <http://www.state.me.us/spo/pubs/index.php>

<sup>4</sup> Task Force on Creating a Future for Youth in Maine. (January, 2004). Final Report. Maine State Legislature.

degree (14.9 percent versus 28.5 percent). Second, the employment rate of people with disabilities varies considerably by disability type. Whereas nearly half of working age adults who report a sensory disability are employed, the employment rates of those with physical disabilities, mental disabilities, and self-care disabilities are much lower, at 29 percent, 26 percent, and 18 percent, respectively.<sup>5</sup> These results suggest that sensory disabilities may present less of an employment barrier compared with physical or mental disabilities, or that people with sensory disabilities are better served by existing employment support systems. The challenge this raises is to ensure that the system of supports is responsive to the heterogeneous needs of people with disabilities.

## **Detailed Findings**

Coalition members and staff reviewed the extensive information gathered through focus groups, surveys, interviews and secondary sources. Information was organized into these areas of focus:

- Employers
- Individuals with disabilities
- Ten key service systems: Vocational rehabilitation; Workforce Investment Boards; benefits planning; K-12 education/school-to-work transition planning; post-secondary education; developmental disabilities service system; mental health service system; Social Security Administration (SSA); MaineCare (Medicaid); transportation

The information was put into corresponding tables that can be found in Appendix L. Each table describes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats regarding the employment of people with disabilities.

Next, the coalition condensed this information into eight major themes — highlighting important points collected during the planning process. These eight themes are described below:

### **Theme 1: Workers with disabilities face many of the same challenges as other workers**

- Availability of jobs
  - Quantity — there are not enough jobs in Maine
  - Geographic distribution — concentration in southern Maine
  - The majority of employers in Maine are small businesses — which tend to be highly susceptible to economic swings and offer little support for human resources functions.
- Availability of skilled workers
  - Employers report problems finding people who are “ready to work”, i.e. those with adequate education, willingness to learn to meet skill needs, and an understanding of workplace needs and cultures.
- Related issues
  - Transportation — both employers and people with disabilities identified transportation as a major employment barrier, particularly in more rural counties and for evening/weekend shifts.
  - Housing — increasingly difficult to find affordable housing close to jobs
  - Child care

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<sup>5</sup> Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics. (2005). 2004 Disability Status Reports: Maine. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

## **Theme 2: Employers have many concerns about employing people with disabilities**

- Many Maine employers do not view people with disabilities as viable workers
  - A 2005 survey of Maine employers found that only 12% employ anyone with a disability, and 54% said people with disabilities can't do the work.<sup>6</sup>
- Social service/placement agencies don't understand how businesses work
  - Too many uncoordinated placement workers contact employers and don't collaborate to fill open jobs quickly.
- Many workers will not increase their hours, accept promotions, etc. for fear of losing public benefits (Social Security benefits and/or health insurance).
- Legal issues
  - The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) — some employers wrongly believe that no disciplinary action can be taken against an employee with a disability.
  - Concerns about liability exposure
  - Workers Compensation; and second injury protection
- Need for better information and support
  - On accommodations, technical support services and cost information

## **Theme 3: Disability service providers that approach employers as business partners, with business-type strategies, have better success**

- More successful placement services define themselves as “business people.” They approach the recruitment and hiring process from a business perspective, with an eye towards improving the bottom line.
  - Build business partnerships not based just on hiring people with disabilities, rather, provide technical assistance and become customer of businesses.
  - Develop relationships in Chambers of Commerce and other business groups.
- Success has also come with strategies to reduce or share risks or costs of placement
  - Temp to hire
  - Guarantees of performance in jobs filled by new workers with disabilities.
  - Helping to find and use incentives.
  - Ongoing follow-up and troubleshooting.

## **Theme 4: Economic disincentives, real or perceived, play an important role in employment**

- The transition from income supports and other benefits, to earned income and private health and other workplace-provided benefits, is a difficult one.
  - The “all or nothing” nature of cash benefits for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries makes work financially unattractive. The drop in total income (including cash value of health insurance benefits) that results from earning more through a job that likely seems more risky than the cash benefits, is a considerable disincentive to working.<sup>7</sup> One consumer said, “People don't even try to get a job because they're scared of losing medical coverage.” Other consumers urged reforms that would gradually reduce benefits as job income increases, rather than sudden loss that comes under current SSDI rules.

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<sup>6</sup> O'Hara, Frank. (November 2005). Employer Practices and Attitudes Regarding Employing People with Disabilities CHOICES CEO Project, USM Muskie School.

<sup>7</sup> General Accounting Office. (April 1996). SSA Disability Program Redesign Necessary to Encourage Return to Work

- Benefits counseling is a relatively new and under-supported resource. Such counseling helps people make informed decisions about complex and ever-changing policies.
  - Benefits Planning and Outreach grant from SSA has not been increased since 2000. And the other major source of funding for Benefits Counseling positions in Maine — a Work Incentive Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor — ended in 2003. Additional funding is needed to maintain current staffing levels.<sup>8</sup>

**Theme 5: Vocational services to people with disabilities are facing big challenges — particularly in the areas of Career Center services, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and career preparation and other school-to-work planning**

- Maine’s One-Stop Career Centers do not adequately serve people with disabilities
  - Most just refer all people with disabilities to VR, even if service won’t be provided.
    - Career Center staff often assumes that people with disabilities should be referred to VR as the best and only resource. While the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) is one provider of employment services, not all customers who have disabilities need, require or want VR service.<sup>9</sup>
  - Though there have been improvements, there are still problems with access to Career Centers, such as the comfort level and skill of staff offering services to people with disabilities.
    - 38% of staff feel comfortable serving someone who have a disability<sup>9</sup>
    - Assistive technology currently available is out of date, broken or under used.<sup>9</sup>
    - Interpreting services (including American Sign Language and similar services) and assistive listening devices are not available in all Career Centers.<sup>9</sup>
- Vocational Rehabilitation system
  - Long waiting list
    - There are currently over 2,000 Category 1 clients on the waiting list. The wait for VR services is 12 months.<sup>10</sup>
  - Numbers and types of disabilities that VR cannot support at present
    - Demand for services has increased dramatically in recent years, particularly in regards to services for people with mental illness and for youth transitioning from school to work.<sup>11</sup>
    - VR counselors have large caseloads, averaging over 110 clients.<sup>10</sup>
    - “Maine relies significantly on the Vocational Rehabilitation Department for mental health consumer employment services. Reliance on VR appears to have led, as is the case in a number of states, to limited participation by mental health consumers and a limited connection between clinical and supported employment services.”<sup>12</sup>
  - Focus on initial placement and only 90-day follow-up

<sup>8</sup> Muskie School interviews with benefits counseling system staff and managers.

<sup>9</sup> AbleME project statement of work

<sup>10</sup> [Maine DVR State Plan for 2006](#).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Baird, National Coalition for Health Systems Development. (July 26, 2005). [Technical Assistance Memo](#)..

<sup>12</sup> National Technical Assistance Center for State Mental Health. (August 30, 2005). [Peer Review Visit to the State of Maine July 25-26, 2005, Final Report](#). Page. 22. available on the Internet at <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/peer.doc>

- No sustained support for worker or employer. This prevents even initial plans from being drawn up because of rules stating that a funding commitment from DHHS needs to be in place before VR can open a case with someone who also needs services from DHHS.

**Theme 6: Some disability groups, such as those with mental illness, youth with severe disabilities and the developmentally disabled, face greater challenges to employment.**

Individuals with mental illness:

- Face major stigma and lack of understanding of different types of mental illness, and illness management.
  - Stigma is a large issue for people with mental illness diagnoses — some argue stigma is more present with this disability than most others. “The myths and stigma associated with mental illness persist and prevent many persons from getting the care and help they need. The stigma associated with mental illness is often reinforced by outdated or misinformed public policies at the state and community levels... These types of policies make it more difficult for persons with mental illness to be equal participants in their communities.”<sup>13</sup>
- Are often much more reluctant to disclose illness, which can lead to misunderstanding by employer and lack of protection under ADA and similar laws.
- Services through the MaineCare program for individuals with developmental disabilities do not allow employment services.
  - Funding for Free Standing Day Habilitation can not be used for employment — Day Habilitation providers are having to turn away employment opportunities for clients because the funding does not allow these activities. Students who have been educated in the school system may not be able to pursue employment goals due to this barrier.
  - Sheltered workshops are an option for individuals with mental retardation and autism, who are waiver eligible.
- Youth with more severe disabilities:
  - Have parents who are often not supportive of employment for fear of loss of supports.
  - Have very few work experiences; are given little career orientation while in middle and high school.
    - In general, students with disabilities have unrealistic expectations about adult services and supports for employment or other community involvement.

**Theme 7: There are some promising practices that can be better used**

- MaineCare work incentives
  - Workers with Disabilities Option allows individuals with disabilities to keep MaineCare coverage with total income up to 250% of the federal poverty level.

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<sup>13</sup> Brennan, Michael, and Lambert, David. Community Mental Health Stigma Project. Muskie School, University of Southern Maine. April 4, 2003. p. 2.

- However, current cap on unearned income keeps out many with employment experience and potential. Proposed legislation (LD 463) would remove the unearned income cap.
- Projects with industry
  - Helps build better business relationships
- Benefits counseling services
  - There is strong evidence that Benefits Counseling can significantly increase client earnings.<sup>14</sup>
  - But it is a limited resource in Maine, and there is a need to build capacity.
- National technical assistance resources and cross-state collaborative strategies

### **Theme 8: There are also some significant current challenges**

- Federal and state budget and overall economic climate
- Good data to evaluate current systems is hard to come by, would help in identifying needs and the best means of improving outcomes.
- Changes in some major programs
  - Medicare Drug Benefits
- No state-level employer business-to-business resource addressing disability issues
  - Many other states have Business Leadership Networks, or employer-led Governor's Committees on Employment of People with Disabilities.

## **Prioritizing Areas of Planning Based on Findings**

### **Narrowing Priorities to Six Key Areas of Action**

Based on the findings above, the Commission on Disability and Employment and staff drafted a list of fourteen possible priority areas:

1. Further develop benefits counseling system.
2. Better DHHS/DOL collaboration strategies.
3. Better leadership in Maine on overall workforce issues and employment for workers with disabilities.
4. Create disability and employment outcome measures and data integration.
5. Create a disability workforce and employment business resource center.
6. Institute an employer outreach and education campaign.
7. Improve in-school preparation for post-secondary education and employment.
8. Ensure Maine state government is a model employer.
9. Improve One-stop CareerCenter services for workers with disabilities.
10. Institute post-secondary education and employment services for youth transitioning from school to work.
11. Reduce employer liability exposure related to workplace opportunities.
12. Strengthen MaineCare incentives for workers with disabilities.
13. Improve transportation supports for employment.
14. Improve vocational rehabilitation services system.

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<sup>14</sup> Tremblay, Tim; Smith, James; Xie, Haiyi and Robert Drake. (December, 2003). [The Impact of Specialized Benefits Counseling Services on Social Security Administration Disability Beneficiaries in Vermont.](http://www.dad.state.vt.us/dvr/voc rehab/vwii/s5_reports.htm)

These fourteen priority areas were submitted to both the Commission on Disability and Employment and the CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership group for discussion and ranking. A voting exercise was used with both groups and rankings were compared. For detailed results of the voting see Appendix J.

### **The Top Six Priority Areas**

In comparing the results of the strategic priority voting by the two leadership groups, the following six areas emerged as the highest priorities:

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 description of each of the six strategic priority areas follows in section below.

## **VI. Recommended Actions**

In 2006, action will begin on the 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 a range of people and organizations representing key constituencies.

For each of the six priorities, preliminary details about needs, resources, short-term activities and results, and long term sustainability are described below.

### **Strategic Priority 1. Create an employer outreach and education plan.**

#### **Statement of Need**

The vast majority of Maine businesses do not employ people with disabilities, possibly due to a perception by some business people that workers with disabilities cannot do the work. There is a need for outreach and education to Maine employers — to provide information about value of hiring people with disabilities, resources employers can use to make accommodations, what the Americans with Disabilities Act requires, and information about liability issues.

#### **Key Resources (Inputs)**

- Successful providers like Allies Inc. that have been very successful at working with employers, building business-led advisory groups, and business-to-business support networks.

- Many employers who serve on boards of directors of key non-profits and who can be consulted and engaged at reaching out to their business peers.
- In-state business networks such as Chambers of Commerce.
- Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility (MEBSR).<sup>15</sup>
- Successful employer outreach and education campaign practices used in other states
- National organizations that successfully promote similar employer outreach and education efforts.

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- Appoint members to an “Employer Outreach and Education Task Group” that will oversee the planning and implementation of activities in this priority area. This group will also identify resources needed to conduct its activities, including staff, external consultants (including national technical assistance supports made available through this project), and funding to support other activities.
- Develop a structure for a state-level statewide employer outreach and education campaign.
  - engage business leaders in strategic planning that identifies successful outreach tools and campaigns in the past.
  - develop a plan for a centralized information center that can be promoted as a “one-stop source” of accurate and reliable information.
- Repeat of the statewide Minding Maine’s Business survey as conducted in 2005.
  - write new survey questions targeted at small business owners
  - engage in one or more focus groups, also with small business owners, to examine in more depth how their needs can be addressed.
- Develop library of promotional materials.
  - identify and catalogue existing promotional materials
  - develop new ones to address gaps in materials
  - make copies available to state, regional and local business associations
- Increase business-to-business promotion events and opportunities.
- Develop strategic plan to create business-led promotional group.
  - patterned on business leadership groups in other states
  - build on successful business councils in state operated by key rehabilitation service providers.

### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- Overall plan for a state-wide employer outreach and education campaign
- Results of the second Minding Maine’s Business employer survey
- Library of promotional materials
- Central inventory of business-to-business promotion events and opportunities
- Strategic plan to create statewide business-led promotional and networking group

### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Increase in the number of Maine employers who hire people with disabilities.

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<sup>15</sup> MEBSR was founded in 1993 “on the belief that profitability and social responsibility comprise a dual bottom line. By social responsibility, we mean the establishment of business practices that positively impact employees, the environment, and their communities.” More information on the Internet at <http://www.mebsr.org/>

- Employers have specific knowledge of, and experience regarding, the ability of people with disabilities to be excellent employees.
- Employers know how to obtain reliable information regarding the successful employment of people with disabilities, including technical support for access, accommodation and related issues.
- Employers receive encouragement and support from their business peers — both in individual connections as well as in groups — regarding employment of workers with disabilities.
- Increase in numbers of people with disabilities who are hired and who sustain employment.
- Increase in hours worked by, and wages paid to, workers with disabilities in Maine.

### **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities that provide outreach and education to employers related to the successful employment of workers with disabilities would be enhanced by the following:

- Clear information provided from businesses, and in particular small businesses, that this information is helpful.
- Information used in educational and promotional efforts comes primarily from businesses — both in the form of businesses’ results described in promotional materials, and in business-to-business exchange of educational and promotional information.
- There are one or more well-known sources of good information on employment issues related to people with disabilities, rather than many separate and seemingly competitive sources.
- Information is easily available to businesses that are searching for it, but is also promoted to those who may not yet be aware of the benefit of employing workers with disabilities (e.g., ads on business-focused radio and television programs, or promotion at business meetings and conferences).

## **Strategic Priority 2. Ensure that Maine state government is a model employer for people with disabilities.**

### **Statement of Need**

Maine's state government is one of the largest employers in the state. It also has multiple interests in the successful employment of workers with disabilities. Current policies that would help the state government employ more workers with disabilities are not being used. By reviving these policies, and adopting other practices, and then promoting these actions with other private and public employers, significant outcomes will be achieved.

### **Key Resources (Inputs)**

- Specific policy recommendation sent in November 2005 from the Commission on Disability and Employment to the Maine Jobs Council, requesting that “The Maine Jobs Council should advise the Governor that action is needed by Maine state government to implement ‘best practices’ for the hiring, retention and advancement of people with disabilities as employees in state government.”

- Information regarding “best practices” for recruitment, hiring and advancement of people with disabilities from national sources such as the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC)<sup>16</sup> and also from other states.
- Practices that were developed and tested during a Supported Employment/Special Appointment Pilot Project conducted within Maine state government starting in 1989, and made permanent by formal rules adopted in 1992.<sup>17</sup>

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- Appoint members to a Maine state government “Model Employer Task Group” that will oversee the planning and implementation of activities in this priority area. The group will also identify resources needed to conduct its activities, including staff, external consultants (including national technical assistance supports available through the CHOICES CEO project), and other funding needed for necessary activities.
- The Maine Jobs Council will formally recommend that the Governor issue an executive order that makes the employment of workers with disabilities a priority for Maine state government.
- The Commission on Disability and Employment should assist with specific activities that are addressed in the Governor’s executive order, including the following:
  - The designation of a centralized state office that promotes the employment of people with disabilities. This office will report to the Governor and his cabinet, and deliver “a clear message ‘from the top’ that the employment of people with disabilities is a state priority,” as recommended by the EEOC.
- The development and testing of a training curriculum that offers information to managers and staff at all levels of state government on “best practices” and existing rules regarding the recruitment and employment of persons with disabilities; there will be an emphasis on the requirements and benefits of full implementation of those rules.
- The documentation of Maine state government “best practices” that are promoted every October during “Disability Employment Awareness Month.”
- The collection and cataloguing of information and support regarding reasonable accommodations, assistive technology, and other resources to facilitate accommodations for employees. This information should be readily available to managers and staff at all levels of state government — over the Internet, in print form, and on electronic media such as DVDs and CDs.

### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- Governor’s executive order
- Centralized office, training curriculum, best practices documentation, and other specific outcomes from the activities described above

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<sup>16</sup> In October 2005 the EEOC released a major report titled Final Report on Best Practices in Employment of Persons with Disabilities in State Government, which is available on the Internet at [http://www.eeoc.gov/initiatives/nfi/final\\_states\\_best\\_practices\\_report.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/initiatives/nfi/final_states_best_practices_report.html)

<sup>17</sup> Amendment to Chap. 8, Certification and Appointment, Section 3.A.2, and addition of new Section 6, Special Appointment and Supported Employment Programs to Chap. 8, in Title 18, Dept. of Administrative and Financial Services, Sect. 389 Bureau of Human Resources.

### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Successful employment experiences of persons with disabilities within state government, as well as the business practices and approaches that supported these successes, are documented and shared with other public and private employers.
- Private sector employers are aware, or more aware, that the Maine state government is a source for reliable business data and experiential information related to the successful employment of people with disabilities.
- Maine's private employers have a better understanding of how Maine state government — as a business and as the government— shares their interests, are more motivated to recruit workers with disabilities, and use government services and incentives that aid that process.
- Increase in number of people with disabilities who are hired and sustain employment in both the Maine state government and by its contractors.
- Increase in hours worked by, and wages paid to, Maine citizens with disabilities.

### **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities supporting the outcomes described above, and the communication of these achievements to businesses and the public, would be enhanced by the following:

- Widespread awareness of, and support for, a state office that promotes the employment of people with disabilities. This centralized office advances "a clear message 'from the top' that the employment of people with disabilities is a state priority," and reports to the Governor and his cabinet.
- Training provided to human resources managers and supervisors as an ongoing part of regular state government human resources management, and not as a separately contracted activity.
- Regular promotion of Maine State Government's "best practices" to other employers as well as to the general public.

## **Strategic Priority 3. Post-secondary Education and Employment Services for Youth Transitioning from School to Work**

### **Statement of Need**

The services received while in secondary school (children services) help youth complete high school. Once graduated, services change to adult services, which are often not as comprehensive as children services. Adult services can impact whether someone is able to find and keep a job, or continue for further education and training. The funding of adult services, and the types of services offered need to be fully examined to ensure resources are being spent in the most effective way.

### **Key Resources (Inputs)**

- Maine Transition Network (Committee on Transition)
- Maine Children's Cabinet, which has set transition as one of their three top areas of focus for 2006-07.
- Youth Transitions (School-to-Work) Committee of the Maine Jobs Council

- Disability Service Providers Alliance (DSPA) in southern Maine<sup>18</sup>
- Maine Parent Federation
- Maine Community College System
- STRIVE U, a two-year post-secondary education and training program for young adults with developmental disabilities that began as a demonstration program in 2004.

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- Appoint members to a “Post-secondary Education and Employment Services Youth Transiting from School to Work” task group that will oversee the planning and implementation of activities in this priority area. The group will also identify resources needed to conduct its activities, including CHOICES CEO staff, external consultants, and other funds for necessary activities.
- Develop a specific strategic plan for post-secondary education and employment services for youth in transition, with such plan developed jointly by the Commission on Disability and Employment, the Maine Transition Network, and the Children’s Cabinet.
- Conduct specific strategic assessment related to supported education services and supports in Maine, and present findings from this effort at a one-day forum for all interested stakeholders.

### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- Strategic plan for post-secondary education and employment services for youth transitioning from school to work.
- Information and resources that emerge from a one-day forum, inventory of current supported education services and resources in Maine.

### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Transition from child to adult services is seamless, and employment and post-secondary education and training is adequately funded for those who desire to pursue it.
- Parents better understand the differences between services and supports in high school, and those available in post-secondary education and various adult services.
- Parents have the resources to be strong advocates for their children with disabilities throughout the education and transition process.
- Students with disabilities are strong self-advocates, receive support to recognize their long term goals, and are able to identify who can help to make these goals possible.
- Educators and service providers know best practices, legislation, and needs in terms of transition, and use this knowledge to the best of their abilities.
- Educators and service providers understand the connection between youths’ high school experience and graduation in relation to post-school outcomes, such as employment.
- Employers are better connected to schools at both the secondary and post-secondary levels, and are able to provide educational work opportunities, job/career orientation, and to be a partner in developing student skills that meet future workforce needs.

### **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities that support the outcomes described above would be enhanced by the following:

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<sup>18</sup> More information available on the Internet at <http://www.goaccess.org/>

- Ongoing commitment of transition planning and action partners, including the Children’s Cabinet and the Maine Committee on Transition.
- A commitment by all state agencies — led by the Department of Education — to post-secondary education outcomes for all youth, including youth with disabilities.
- Close working partnerships between schools at all levels and employers, so that education meets both the needs of students and the workforce needs of employers.
- Service and advocacy systems that assist in transition planning and connecting youth to post-secondary education and employment, are supported with adequate and stable public and private funding.
- Data collection and reporting clearly demonstrate progress and continuing needs.

## **Strategic Priority 4. Improvement of Vocational Rehabilitation Service System**

### **Statement of Need**

Many individuals with disabilities do not receive services, or services in a timely manner, due to a variety of problems with Maine’s vocational rehabilitation, One-Stop Career Centers, and related services. It is often not clear whether solutions to identify problems need to come from within the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), or whether broader cross-system vocational reforms are needed. Thus, in defining strategic plans in this area, roles and boundaries must be defined and respected. The DOL and BRS leaders and managers are responsible for designing and applying internal fixes. Other agencies and service systems are similarly responsible for fixes that help to coordinate with the VR service system. Finally, the Commission on Disability and Employment, the Maine Jobs Council, and other groups can work to ensure adequate resources and a supportive policy context that improves Maine’s VR service system.

### **Key Resources (Inputs)**

- Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) leadership team.
- Technical assistance on best practices in public VR service systems available to Maine and to BRS from a variety of resources, including the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within the Department of Education, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the CHOICES CEO project, and the National Coalition for Health Systems Development (NCHSD).
- The State Rehabilitation Councils formulated to provide guidance to the two designated state units within BRS, as well as the Advisory Council to the Division on Deafness.
- AbleME project and other DOL efforts to improve access for workers with disabilities, in partnership with the vocational rehabilitation program — particularly in One-stop Career Centers where multiple workforce partners and service systems are co-located.
- New amendments to the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency Program proposed by the Social Security Administration which appear to support better outcomes within state VR systems.

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- Specific technical assistance activities with BRS are already underway, and a work plan for 2006 has been developed that includes work tasks, timelines, deliverables, and persons responsible.

- Complete the newest version of the VR services Consumer Satisfaction survey, which is being done in conjunction with other New England states.
- Complete the Comprehensive Needs Assessment.
- Coordinated efforts among various systems in Maine to work collaboratively with DOL/BRS and the Social Security Administration to implement recently proposed changes to the Ticket to Work regulations.
- Continued technical assistance providing information on best practices in other states, findings from relevant research, and information on key VR systems issues — such as performance-based payment mechanisms and coordination between VR and benefits counseling service systems.
- Coordination of the benefits planning system under direction of BRS, and other benefits counseling system planning and development activities as detailed in Strategic Priority 5, below.

#### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- VR services Consumer Satisfaction Survey report
- Comprehensive needs assessment
- Vocation Rehabilitation service system chartbook (a document that tries to explain complex VR issues and data with less complex text and graphs and other visuals).
- Design for BRS annual report

#### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Current waiting list for vocational rehabilitation services is significantly reduced or eliminated.
- Major service systems, other than vocational rehabilitation, are serving increased numbers of people with disabilities and achieving significant employment outcomes.
- Increase in numbers of people with disabilities who are hired and sustain employment with the Maine state government and its contractors, and in the private sector.
- Increase in hours worked by, and wages paid to, individuals with disabilities in Maine.

#### **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities that support the outcomes described above would be enhanced by the following:

- The development of adequate research, evaluation and analytical capabilities within BRS.
- Significant technical assistance available to BRS to supplement internal expertise —, particularly in the identifying and evaluating of best practices in Maine and in other states, and in strategic planning, surveys, policy analysis and other research.
- Increased capacity related to program evaluation, policy improvement, and strategic planning that results in the development and public dissemination of clear reports that demonstrate increased employment for people with disabilities.

## **Strategic Priority 5. Benefits Counseling System Development**

#### **Statement of Need**

Benefits counseling services can greatly impact employment in Maine, and thus should be expanded in a way that is significant and sustainable.

### **Key Resources (Inputs)**

- Significant system development money from BRS, plus from the CHOICES CEO grant, adds to the national funds already in the system from SSA.
- Significant commitment made by BRS to design, build and manage a larger system of benefits counseling services in Maine.
- Excellent technical assistance on both a national and a regional level made available to Maine through the National Coalition of Health Systems Development (NCHSD),<sup>19</sup> and the Northeast Work Incentives Training and Technical Assistance Center at Cornell University.<sup>20</sup>
- A benefits counseling system planning group that includes benefits counseling service managers and counselors who are housed at Maine Medical Center, Alpha One, the Disability Rights Center, and the Bureau of Vocational Services. This group is staffed by the CHOICES CEO project based at the USM Muskie School.

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- A significant portion of the CHOICES CEO budget (10%, the maximum allowed by CMS) will be allotted for benefits counseling services, and benefits system development in Maine.
- The CHOICES CEO benefits counseling planning group will continue to meet at least quarterly to continue strategic planning and action activities.
- Current separate funding by both BRS and the CHOICES CEO project is being brought together so that clear and consistent service terms are followed, including expected performance measure and services outcomes.
- Other states' best practices in benefits counseling will be examined for possible adaptation here.

### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- Coordinated funding contracts that better align current benefits counseling services
- Detailed action plan for increasing benefits counseling services

### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Additional counselors (both full-time and part-time) allowing more people with disabilities to have detailed benefit plans prepared, and to receive counseling support.
- Significant expansion in the number of people with disabilities who receive benefits counseling, and in the number of formal benefit plans that are prepared.
- People with disabilities are able to receive in-depth benefits counseling on a timely basis so that quick and informed action can be taken related to job offers and advancement.
- Increase in number of people with disabilities who are hired and sustain employment with the Maine state government and its contractors, and in the private sector.
- Increase in hours worked by, and wages paid to, workers with disabilities.

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<sup>19</sup> Maine is a member of NCHSD at the State Leadership Level, which qualifies it for specific levels of technical assistance. More information on the Internet at <http://www.nchsd.org/>

<sup>20</sup> More information on the Internet at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/dep/nwittac.html>

## **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities that support the outcomes described above would be enhanced by the following:

- Well documented and widely disseminated information on the positive impact of benefits counseling services on the employment of workers with disabilities — including earnings, length of job term, and so forth.
- A steady funding stream that includes both federal and state resources.
- Opportunity for qualified service providers to receive reimbursement for benefits counseling on a fee-for-service basis that is tied to employment outcomes as much, or more than, the actual time spent providing the counseling.
- One central agency responsible for the management of statewide benefits counseling services.
- Clear state-level policies that include definitions of quality benefits counseling services and outcomes.

## **Strategic Priority 6. Improve Disability and Employment Outcome Measures and Data Integration**

### **Statement of Need**

There is a lack of actionable information about the employment of people with disabilities in the state of Maine. Programs that serve people with disabilities often do not include employment outcomes as part of their administrative data collection, or do not track people over time. Further, many people with disabilities receive employment supports from multiple state systems that do not share data with one another — preventing analysis of service use and identification of overlapping services. Maine needs a thorough set of employment indicators to track the experiences of people with disabilities, and a central repository of publicly-available employment and service data that can be used by policymakers and other stakeholders to evaluate existing systems and plan future improvements.

### **Key Resources**

- CHOICES CEO staff based at the Muskie School who have extensive experience in both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, and large dataset and analytical file creation.
- Technical support available from the National Coalition for Health Systems Development (NCHSD).
- Extensive data related to disability and employment services/outcomes available from Maine DHHS — particularly in MaineCare data files, and in data collected by both the Office of Adult Mental Health Services and the Office of Adults with Cognitive and Physical Disability Services.
- Extensive data on disability and employment services/outcomes available from the Maine DOL, — particularly, data collected by BRS (each of the three separate BRS service divisions), the Bureau of Employment Security, the Bureau of Unemployment Compensation, and the Bureau of Labor Market Information Services.
- New efforts to define service outcomes, including those related to job readiness and employment, and other performance-based data collection and analysis, that are under way in 2005-2006 by both Maine DHHS and DOL.

- Extensive efforts in cross-system data mapping and integration achieved by the Maine Quality Choices Data Integration Project which produced a Roadmap for Data System Integration and other important products (November 2001).<sup>21</sup>

### **Suggested 2006 Activities**

- Create an “Employment and Disability Data Integration and Outcomes” working group that meets at least monthly and that includes, at a minimum, DHHS and DOL staff who have access to agency data files, and USM Muskie School staff who have experience working with data collection and analysis with both agencies.
- Focused and action-oriented strategic planning by the Employment and Disability Data Integration and Outcomes working group that identifies resources (current data integration capacity and results of prior data integration efforts), barriers and system gaps/weaknesses, and opportunities and challenges.
- Using data from both DHHS and DOL, Produce a report that analyzes longitudinal wage data for workers with disabilities who are, or formerly were, enrolled in the MaineCare Workers with Disabilities Option.

### **Expected/Potential Products (Outputs) for 2006**

- Report from the Employment and Disability Data Integration and Outcomes working group that evaluates cross-system data integration ability, and related barriers, and opportunities. The report will also recommend Executive and/or Legislative action to remove barriers for ongoing data integration and outcomes measurement.
- Printing and dissemination of the second edition of "Employment Indicators for Maine."
- Report on earnings by workers with disabilities who are, or formerly were, enrolled in the MaineCare Workers with Disabilities Option.
- Inter-agency data linkages and sharing agreements are developed and implemented.

### **Anticipated/Expected Outcomes for 2006 and beyond**

- Better collection and analysis of data related to employment supports and disability, both within and across current service systems in Maine, At a minimum this data lists the number of people with disabilities who are hired and sustain employment within the Maine state government, by its contractors, and in the private sector; and the number of hours worked by, and wages paid to, Maine workers with disabilities.
- Data are shared across once-separate service systems to better identify system issues and improvements.
- Regular reports are provided to policymakers, employers and other stakeholders about the effectiveness of public programs.
- Using available data, public dollars are better allocated to maximize the employment of people with disabilities.

### **Sustainability**

The continuation of activities that support the outcome measures described above would be enhanced by the following:

- Reliable data on employment outcomes for people with disabilities that is available to the public via web sites and various accessible printed forms.

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<sup>21</sup> More information available on the Internet at <http://www.mainerealchoices.org/data.htm>

- Consistent research and report development resources available to state agencies, service providers, advocacy groups and businesses.
- Data collection and reporting methods that are clearly defined and simple enough to be repeated at least yearly, and which therefore show over time whether there is improvement in employment outcomes

## VII. Moving Maine’s Strategic Plan Forward

Four elements address how this plan should move forward on the six recommended areas of strategic priority:

- **Strategic Leadership:** Who oversees the plan?
- **Communication and Engagement:** How do people learn about and become engaged in activities to implement the strategic plan?
- **Measuring Progress**
- **Celebrating Achievements**

### Strategic Leadership: Who oversees the plan?

Maine’s Commission on Disability and Employment — the group primarily responsible for this strategic plan — is the primary group for presenting, promoting, implementing, and monitoring this plan as it moves forward. The role of this group in “owning” and promoting this plan is entirely consistent with its role as defined in Maine law<sup>22</sup>, which is to “advise, consult and assist the executive and legislative branches of State Government on activities of State Government that affect the employment of disabled individuals,” as well as to “serve as an advocate on behalf of disabled citizens promoting and assisting activities designed to further equal opportunity for people with disabilities.”

In implementing this plan and coordinating information and activities to ensure its success, the Commission must work very closely with its parent group: The Maine Jobs Council. The Council functions as the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB), and is the designated workforce development advisory body in Maine, with mandated annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature.

An important asset that the Maine Jobs Council brings to the implementation of this strategic plan is its relationship to Maine’s Workforce Cabinet. In 2003, Governor John Baldacci created the Workforce Cabinet, which is responsible for recommending state workforce development policies to the Governor. The Cabinet is chaired by the Commissioner of DOL, and includes as members: 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 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.

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<sup>22</sup> Maine Revised Statutes Annotated (MRSA) Title 26 (Labor and Industry), Chapter 25 (Workforce Investment), Section 2006 (Establishment of Maine Jobs Council), Sub-section 5-B. Included in this report as Appendix B; also available online at <http://janus.state.me.us/legis/statutes/26/title26sec2006.html>

## **Communication and Engagement:** How do people learn about and become engaged in activities to implement the strategic 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.

While it is important to engage all types of stakeholders, two constituencies present specific challenges: people with disabilities who receive employment services, and employers.

People with disabilities were reached through focus groups, an online survey, and participation in the groups involved with strategic planning. Once the plan was drafted, additional feedback was sought by holding public meetings around the state. The use of technology such as the Internet and interactive television to reach people was instrumental.

The importance of engaging employers is reflected in this plan's top strategic priority: employer outreach. The best methods for involving employers include current business associations and groups, and business-to-business communication.

Continued engagement of stakeholders is imperative for the plan to be effectively implemented and re-designed over time. In the next year, the two primary approaches to gather input from various stakeholders will be the use of technology and work with existing groups. Determining other effective techniques for communication will be an additional challenge.

Technology plays an important role in hearing input, and engaging people across geographic distances. These are very real issues for a state as large as Maine. Assistive technology, distance learning, video conferencing and online discussions are effective communications methods that break down barriers of distance and access. While using these tools will be helpful, sharing information collected in a meaningful way will be a challenge in the next year. Internet and database capabilities to organize, present, and receive input on data will be discussed in more detail.

Ideas being explored to assist in communicating with stakeholders include both listservs and an electronic and print newsletter that updates readers on activities and issues.

## **Measuring Progress**

The ultimate 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. Work on developing a set of indicators began in 2005, when the Commission, working closely with project staff, produced a report entitled *Employment of People with Disabilities in Maine*.<sup>23</sup> The report outlined a set of baseline employment status indicators including:

- Employment participation of working-age adults with disabilities (American Community Survey, US Census Bureau)

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<sup>23</sup> This report was modeled after the Massachusetts Employment and Disability Snapshot Report, produced by staff and partners of the Massachusetts Medicaid Infrastructure Grant.

- People with disabilities receiving intensive services from One-Stop Career Centers (US Department of Labor, WIA National Performance Reports)
- Employment rate of individuals on Supplemental Security Income (Social Security Administration)
- Number of Bureau of Rehabilitation Services clients entering competitive employment (RSA 911)

Each of the indicators is drawn from publicly-available sources, noted in parentheses above. These indicators will continue to be monitored and reported by the Commission on Disability and Employment on at least an annual basis. Commission members are interested in identifying additional indicators of the economic well-being of people with disabilities, such as the number of people in jobs that pay a living wage, the number of people who are looking for employment, and the number that are self-employed.<sup>24</sup> Project staff will continue to look for new data sources and will add indicators as they become available.

Because employment outcomes are affected by many factors that are beyond the control of this project — such as the state of the economy, availability of federal funding for support services, and societal attitudes about people with disabilities — the high-level 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 those efforts do not result in an increase of the number of people with disabilities who get jobs in the short-term. So progress in each of the priority areas will also be measured using a set of short- and intermediate-term indicators that if achieved, would lead to better employment for people with disabilities over time. 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.

Early in 2006, each of the six strategic priority areas will be organized into “logic models.” Logic models graphically depict the movement from planning (identifying resources and starting activities) to action (activities and products) to real systems change (short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes). In short, they are a roadmap that allows stakeholders to see the big picture of how a plan will be achieved. They also provide a structure for identifying the indicators and measures that will assess progress made toward the outcomes.

Examples of the type of logic models that will be developed are provided in Appendix I.

## **Celebrating Achievements**

Finally, it will be important to celebrate the major achievements that will result from the implementation of this strategic plan. There are many reasons why this is important, including:

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<sup>24</sup> Commission on Disability and Employment. Meeting Minutes from June 16, 2005. [http://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=mjc\\_meetings&id=9083](http://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=mjc_meetings&id=9083)

- Recognizing the vision, dedication, and hard work of those who have made this plan a success;
- Ensuring 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 as well; and
- Extending vision and hope to others.

The Commission on Disability and Employment is committed to recognizing success and celebrating achievements wherever possible. As an expression of this commitment, the Commission will host these activities:

1. **An annual forum.** The forum will be held around a positive theme, and will promote success stories that emerge from this project.
  - The success stories will be presented from the standpoint of both employees and employers.
  - These success stories will be written up and disseminated beyond the forum itself. Some might be written as more detailed case studies to help readers understand the more technical elements of the effort.
  - The Commission is exploring ways that workers and employers can be featured on the job — such as videotapes of the workplace that include co-worker testimonials.
2. **Annual excellence and success awards.** Ideas for awards include the following:
  - An award for employers who are nominated by employees.
  - An award for creative accommodations that would recognize the benefits for non-disabled employees and customers, as well as for a person with a disability.

## VIII. About the Planning Process

By design this project was a collaborative effort. It chose to work with the many groups already engaged in strategic planning activities related to the employment of workers with disabilities, rather than create new planning groups.<sup>25</sup> It identified these groups and tried to connect with as many as possible. This information was documented to assist with strategic assessment and planning. See the Planning Group and Activity table provided in Appendix F for an example of these efforts. Also see Section II: Contributors and Acknowledgements for a listing of those involved.

### Leadership Groups

This strategic plan was developed in collaboration with three leadership groups, each of which played a role in the data collection, analysis, review, revision, and forwarding of the final plan to state leaders. The three groups are the Maine Jobs Council, the Commission on Disability and Employment, and the CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership Group. Each is described

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<sup>25</sup> The only exceptions to this are the CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership Group, and also the Benefits Planning System group, both started at the beginning of 2005.

below. Additionally, a “Stakeholder Involvement in Strategic Planning Process” chart is included as Appendix E.

## 1. The Maine Jobs Council

**The Maine Jobs Council**<sup>26</sup> was identified as the preferred body to undertake Maine’s CEO strategic plan. This decision was made in part because of its existing commitment to people with disabilities, but more importantly, because it is the designated workforce development advisory body in Maine, with mandated annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature. Working in close collaboration with the Jobs Council ensured that planning efforts for people with disabilities were well integrated into the State’s comprehensive plan for workforce development.

The Maine Jobs Council made some specific operational changes in 2005, just as this project began. These changes included:

- The Council planned to meet fewer times during the year — perhaps as few as two or three times.
- The primary work of the Council was to be done by its standing committees, which include the Commission on Disability and Employment.
- Work products and policy recommendations from the Committees are to be included in the annual report submitted by the Council to the Governor. It has been assumed throughout this project that this would include a form of this strategic plan itself.

## 2. The Commission on Disability and Employment

**The Standing Commission on Disability and Employment** (in the statute referred to as the Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities<sup>27</sup>) was created within the Jobs Council to replace the former Governor’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, moving the advisory function into the mainstream of Maine’s workforce development planning.

Its role, as established in Maine law, is:

- To advise, consult and assist the executive and legislative branches on activities of state government that affect the employment of people with disabilities; and
- To serve as an advocate on behalf of people with disabilities by promoting and assisting activities designed to further equal opportunity.

The authorizing statute for the Commission (cited in full in Appendix B) makes very strong statements about its role in relation to advising, assisting, education, and advocacy on behalf of workers with disabilities, employers and the general public. Given this role, and a commitment to meeting at least monthly, the Commission on Disability and Employment was chosen as the primary strategic assessment and planning body for this project.

The Commission was in a transitional phase when this project came online. Their membership was in decline and they were meeting infrequently. Through the work of this project the Commission was reinvigorated and in May adopted the following vision and mission statements:

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<sup>26</sup> More information on the Maine Jobs Council can be found on the Internet at <http://www.state.me.us/labor/mjc/>

<sup>27</sup> Maine Revised Statutes Annotated (MRSA) Title 26 (Labor and Industry), Chapter 25 (Workforce Investment), Section 2006 (Establishment of Maine Jobs Council), Sub-section 5-B. Included in this report as Appendix B; also available online at <http://janus.state.me.us/legis/statutes/26/title26sec2006.html>

- **Vision:** A work force that includes all people with disabilities who are employed in jobs which meet their economic and personal needs.
- **Mission:** The Commission on Disability and Employment promotes collaboration with the public and private sectors to increase awareness and to influence policy related to employment for people with disabilities.

The Commission on Disability and Employment continued to meet monthly throughout 2005, with the work of this strategic plan as a significant part of its agenda.

### **3. The CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership Group**

A new Strategic Plan Leadership Group was created early in the project, charged with developing and overseeing this plan. This group includes members from both of the DHHS and DOL state agency partners, the Jobs Council, the CHOICES Advisory Group, the Work Group for Community Living, policy makers, workers, employers, and others.

Early in 2005, project staff met individually with most Leadership Group members in order to orient members to the project, secure agreements for commitment to the group; and get preliminary data on systems, needs and opportunities.

In October, the Leadership Group met to engage in intensive planning activities. The result of this effort was the information categorized as “Opportunities” and “Challenges.” The group also identified “Big Ideas” (those characterized as long-term, more ambitious in scope or feasibility) and “Little Ideas” (those that are shorter term, more immediately attainable).

The Leadership group met again in early December to review and endorse the draft strategic plan, and to map Leadership Group activities for 2006. Members of the CHOICES CEO Strategic Plan Leadership Group are listed in Appendix C.

### **Other Strategic Assessment Partners**

Several other groups helped in strategic assessment for this plan:

- **CHOICES Advisory Group:** A technical advisory group that has been meeting since 1996 to assist DHHS and other agencies in the MaineCare Workers Option, Ticket to Work, benefits counseling, and related services and supports.
- **Benefits Specialist Provider Group:** A group formed in 2005 to bring together partners engaged in the funding and provision of benefits counseling services in Maine.
- **The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC).**
- **The State Advisory Council to the Division of Deafness Services.**
- **Local Workforce Investment Boards.**

### **Data Collection Activities Supporting this Plan**

During 2005, this project managed its own simultaneous, separate and parallel planning activities. Additionally, planning information was obtained from other activities – some completed but others going on during 2005 – that addressed employment and disabilities issues.

Information learned from all these activities was compiled and analyzed in the development of this strategic plan.

Finally, staff, consultants and technical assistance were used to facilitate planning activities, collect data, and to report and present the findings and recommendations that arose.

Major surveys and focus groups conducted as part of this strategic plan were the:

- “Minding Maine’s Business” survey
- Placement workers focus groups
- Survey of people with disabilities
- Southern Maine Human Resources Association focus group
- Maine Small Business Alliance focus group
- Region V Area Committee on Transition focus group
- Amistad/NAMI focus group

Other strategic assessment activities were the:

- ADA 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in Augusta (July 2005)
- Legislative Forum on Employment Services and Supports for Workers with Disabilities (October 2005)
- Bureau of Rehabilitation Services State Agency technical assistance
- MaineCare (Maine Medicaid) Agency technical assistance

Information on the stakeholder groups engaged in these various activities is provided in Appendix E of this report.

The project followed this four-step process in its planning activities:

1. System Inventory
2. System Analysis/Resource Mapping
3. Strategic Assessment
4. Strategic Plan Development

This four-step process is illustrated on the next page. Each stage was planned to include distinct products that support systems description and strategic planning activities.

### **1. System Inventory**

- What services and systems currently exist?
- How do these services support the employment of people with disabilities?

**Product:** Identification and description of existing services and supports



### **2. System Analysis/Resource Mapping**

- Why do these systems exist?
- Where are there gaps in services and supports?
- Where are there strengths, promising practices, or similar resources that can be used to improve the system?
- What opportunities are present or pending that will help the change process?

**Products:** Logic model; written Resource Map that presents analysis of system strengths and weaknesses.



### **3. Strategic Assessment**

- What areas of the system can we impact?
- How will we make change in this area? What resources will be used?
- What has been tried? What is being done currently to address this area?
- What would we like to address if resources were available?

**Product:** Documentation of areas to work on with existing or potential resources.



### **4. Strategic Plan Development**

- Based on three-step process, develop a product that documents the above three elements —system inventory, system analysis, and strategic assessment.
- Develop achievable and measurable action steps that include time frame and lead person.

**Product:** Written strategic plan that incorporates system inventory, system analysis and strategic assessment.

## Public Review and Comment on the Plan

On November 30, 2005, this plan was released in draft form for public review and comment by being:

- Forwarded to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), in fulfillment of the requirement of the CEO grant award;
- Sent in print form, and other accessible formats, to the members of the Commission on Disability and Employment, the Strategic Plan Leadership Group, the CHOICES Statewide Advisory Group, and members of the Maine Jobs Council;
- Posted on the CHOICES CEO web site for review by the public; and
- Made available in various formats to people who requested a copy, or who were unable to review it on the project web site.

During the second week in December, a series of public meetings were held around the state to present the draft plan, and to hear comments and suggestions. Details of those meetings are below.

### ITV – Interactive Television Sessions Held

**Date:** *Tuesday, December 6, 2005*

**Time:** *5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.*

**Locations:**

- 1- **Augusta (broadcast site):** University of Maine at Augusta,
- 2- **Farmington:** University of Maine at Farmington
- 3- **Fort Kent:** University of Maine at Fort Kent
- 4- **Houlton:** Houlton Higher Education Center
- 5- **Machias:** University of Maine at Machias
- 6- **Presque Isle:** University of Maine at Presque Isle
- 7- **Saco:** University College at Saco
- 8- **Sanford/Springvale:** University College at Sanford

### In-person Sessions Held

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Location</b>
December 6, 2005	8:30 – 10:00 a.m.	Lewiston	University of Southern Maine Lewiston-Auburn College
December 6, 2005	5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.	Portland	University of Southern Maine
December 7, 2005	11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.	Bangor	Bangor Civic Center
December 8, 2005	5:30 – 7:00 p.m.	Augusta	Holiday Inn
December 14, 2005	5:00 – 7:00 p.m.	Portland	IRIS Network, Maine’s Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (also included a web broadcast to individuals affiliated with the IRIS Network)

