

# The Commission on Disability and Employment

## Annual Report 2017

The Commission on Disability and Employment (CDE), established by the Maine Legislature in 1997, promotes collaboration with the public and private sectors to increase awareness and influence policy related to employment for people with disabilities (PWD). The CDE is a statutory committee of the State Workforce Development Board (SWDB) and meets six times a year.

The Chair of the Committee is Jennifer Kimble, Director of the Department of Vocational Services at Maine Medical Center. The members of the Committee this year were: Mel Clarrage, Jeanie Coltart, Gayla Dwyer, Rachel Dyer, Karen Fraser, Jane Moore, and Donald Rice.

### ***Challenges***

Issues identified in previous years continue to present challenges for PWD and employment in Maine.

Poverty: Research correlates poverty with high unemployment, low educational attainment, low-wage jobs, and lack of access to services. Mainers with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by poverty, experiencing it at twice the rate of Mainers without disabilities. According to Maine's Center for Workforce and Research Information (CWRI), from 2010 through 2014, nearly 60 percent of working-age Mainers with a disability lived at or near poverty, compared to Mainers with no disability at 27 percent. Even when employed, the percentage of Mainers with disabilities in or near poverty is 71% higher than the rate of employed people without disabilities (36% vs. 21%).

Over 10 percent (10.29%) of Maine's working-age population receives a disability benefit from the Social Security Administration, ranking Maine 6<sup>th</sup> in the country, preceded only by southern states with high poverty, high unemployment, and a rural landscape (West Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi). Many recipients of Social Security disability or SSI benefits are at or near poverty, but fear that earning income will cause immediate loss of the financial and medical safety net on which they rely. Although this is largely untrue due to special rules that support workers with disabilities, myths and misinformation on this topic persist among PWD and the social service providers that support them. The state should continue to support efforts to provide accurate information about working and how it affects benefits and identify additional means of educating individuals, their families and service providers to dispel the myths and increase the economic self-sufficiency of PWD and their families.

Cultural Perceptions: An area of ongoing concern to the Commission is the impact of societal and cultural messages regarding people with disabilities. These cultural beliefs are longstanding, with even the dictionary defining "disability" as something that "substantially limits activity especially in relation to employment or education." People with disabilities are often seen as individuals who receive services rather than as potential contributors to the economy as employees or business owners. This belief is alive and well among employers, individuals who provide services to PWD, PWD themselves, and even their family members. The reality is that every person with a disability is unique and has individual skills, interests, talents, and abilities that should be considered through the lens of employment. It is critical for Maine to continue existing efforts and develop

additional strategies to combat these assumptions and stereotypes about PWD and employment for all of these groups, particularly considering Maine's workforce shortage.

Access to Effective Services: To effectively serve people with disabilities, all parts of the Workforce Development System (WDS) must improve its accessibility to and engagement of this population. This is specified by rules in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) regarding access to services for people with disabilities. Often, if a CareerCenter customer mentions disability, they are directed to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) only, limiting that customer's opportunity to access the wide range of valuable programming available to all Mainers seeking employment. Not all people with disabilities require or meet eligibility requirements for VR. The Disability Employment Initiative (DEI), which ended in March 2017, has focused on this issue and has developed recommendations for sustainable change in the CareerCenter system. To better assist in advising the WDS on this topic, the CDE invited Edward Upham, the Director of the Bureau of Employment Services, to help explain the structure and accountability of CareerCenters and external partner agencies (LWB providers) in the May 2017 meeting. The Commission also shared with Mr. Upham the DEI recommendations and previous SWB Committee Chairs' recommendations.

Transportation: As a very rural state, availability of and accessibility to reliable transportation is a major concern for any Maine citizen living in poverty. People with disabilities are faced with additional challenges in transportation. The Committee has been following initiatives to address transportation issues, particularly the proposed legislation based on recommendations from the Commission on Independent Living and Disability. The State should seek out successful models in other rural states and work to identify a solution to this pressing need.

## ***Opportunities***

### Impacting Cultural Perceptions:

#### *1. 2016 Empowerment Forum*

The Commission Chair met with Chairs of the State Rehabilitation Council for the Division of the Blind and Visually Impaired (SRC-DBVI), the State Rehabilitation Council for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (SRC-DVR), the State Independent Living Council (SILC), and the Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing & Late Deafened (CDHHLD) regularly throughout the year to share information about common disability-related issues, identify points of advocacy, and to plan and implement the 2016 Empowerment Forum for People with Disabilities in August 2016. The forum included Travis Mills as a keynote speaker, education for the attendees on keeping informed of legislation and advocacy opportunities, and a panel of four Mainers with disabilities that have experienced transitions in their lives and spoke about how they successfully managed those transitions. The forum was well-attended and received high satisfaction ratings from attendees.

#### *2. Employment First Maine*

The Employment First Maine Act of 2013 created a Coalition that met regularly through October 2016, the sunset date of the group identified in the Act. The culmination of this group includes a report that outlines recommendations to improve Maine's employment outcomes for PWD, and specifically notes enhancing the employment competencies of educators and providers of services to children and adults with disabilities. The report is slated to be presented to the 128<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

### *3. Department of Health and Human Services contract requirements and public reporting*

Contracts with the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHS) to provide Community Integration and other services to people with psychiatric illness under MaineCare Section 17 will see changes effective July 1, 2017. New contract language requires providers to document a service recipient's desire to obtain employment, opening the door to developing employment as an individual's treatment plan goal; this must recur every 90 days. In addition, SAMHS began publicly reporting employment data from its Behavioral Health Home agencies (MaineCare Section 92), providing a dashboard to compare performance between agencies. While seemingly small steps, these requirements ensure the topic of employment is addressed with all service recipients and demonstrate the SAMHS commitment to ensuring employment is an encouraged goal for recipients of service.

#### Improving Access to WDS Services:

##### *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)*

The State's four-year WIOA Unified Strategic plan is the system's operating manual and specifies how individuals with disabilities are served by system partners. The plan received final approval with provisions in October 2016. The Steering Committee has been meeting to gather all the elements to accomplish what needs to be done with the implementation strategy of the plan. One of these elements is a Universal Access Work Group, which has been meeting every few months since February 2017. The Commission Chair is a member of this group, which is charged with updating related policies for the Workforce Development System, identifying and developing tools for workforce partner agencies, and establishing Universal Access assessment standards for the system.

#### Dispelling myths to reduce poverty:

##### *Work and Benefits Navigator Training (WBNT)*

Through specialized, time-limited funding from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Department of Health and Human Services with consultation from the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services contracted with vendors to provide training and services to increase the capacity of the DHHS service system to support integrated, community-based employment for PWD across DHHS. This included the development and delivery of a "Work and Benefits Navigator" training to current providers of DHHS-funded services to PWD, to better equip providers to engage in conversations about employment, benefits, and economic opportunity. In this reporting year, eighty-nine providers have attended across the state, resulting in more individuals being equipped with information and knowledge to spread the word about employment opportunities and resources and to dispel myths about work and benefits during their work in disability service provider agencies across the State of Maine. Contracts to continue this training in FY18 have been established, and the Maine Department of Education is joining in the effort, funding a high school WBNT Pilot for FY18. CMS funding expires in September 2017.

**What does the CD&E want to see in Maine regarding employment of people with disabilities in 2018?**

- Increased opportunity for people with disabilities to be engaged in the employment and training process, and encouraged to have a voice regarding the access to and effectiveness of services that are designed to facilitate their access to employment and economic advancement.
- Promotion of ability and reduced cultural stigma regarding the role of people with disabilities in our communities and economy.
- Development of creative and aggressive strategies to get people with disabilities hired in jobs that meet their financial needs. This should include development of employer awareness and recognition of people with disabilities as a potential untapped labor pool.
- Universal design and access to services – where everyone in the State of Maine who needs employment-related services is able to access them easily and efficiently, including people with disabilities of all kinds.

**In the current and future Maine economy and in the interest of having Maine residents available and appropriately skilled to fill existing and new jobs as employers need them, the Workforce Development System (WDS) must improve its accessibility to and engagement of people with disabilities.**

# Maine Department of Labor Highlights related to Employment of People with Disabilities

## *The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services*

The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) continued to target the preparation of youth with disabilities for post-secondary education and employment again this year. This focus complies with regulations enacted in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, but also is supported by evidence that shows that participation in a paid work experience before high school graduation is the best predictor of post-secondary employment for students with a disability (Luecking & Fabian, 2001; Test et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2010; Sima, et al. in press). Having a paid work experience in high school is likewise correlated with obtaining higher wage jobs after high school (Colley & Jamison, 1998). Importantly, research has also shown that participating in work-based learning can keep a high school student engaged – leading to decreased dropout rates and higher academic achievement. (Medrich, Calderon & Hoachlander, 2002).

Experience has led BRS to recognize that seeing young people with disabilities successfully at work as members of the Maine workforce helps to raise post-secondary expectations by families, schools and employers. The following are some examples of the many ways that BRS is investing in youth with disabilities and offering opportunities for their skills to be developed and abilities seen.

- The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)'s **Transition Work-Based Learning (TWBL) Model Demonstration grant** is well underway. In partnership with Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), students with disabilities that are within two years of graduation from high school will be offered employment services to test whether a model of work-based learning improves attainment of competitive integrated post-secondary employment and educational outcomes. Specifically, under the grant, JMG is expanding its services to five new high schools in the Bangor area and DVR is now able to offer Progressive Employment services in the Augusta and Bangor regions. Progressive Employment is an initiative that introduces employers to a new generation of workers through a range of experiences, including job tours, job shadows, paid work experiences and on-the-job training.
- The Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) offered many activities this year as part of the **Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)** for students who are blind or visually impaired. Supplementing the core academic curriculum to increase success at school and ultimately in employment and adulthood, the ECC focusses on nine core areas: compensatory and functional academic skills; orientation & mobility; social interaction; independent living; recreation and leisure; career education; assistive technology; visual efficiency; and self-determination. One such activity involved five students attending the Common Ground Fair where they were required to navigate a large and crowded space and had the opportunity to direct fairgoers on how to sort their trash, as well as then re-sort items placed in the wrong container. Instructing others was a new experience for many of the students, and required a level of assertiveness they were not used to. They also were given an opportunity to budget money when choosing and ordering their own lunches.
- Additionally, DVR and DBVI offered over 200 students and youth innovative **summer employment opportunities**. Students developed job-related and specific work skills and many earned their first

paycheck. These summer work programs engaged universities, schools, county/ town offices, restaurants, recreation centers, hotels, hospitals, retail stores, florists, farmers, and more. See below for some of the specific programs around the State.

- Learning Independence, Fun and Employment (LIFE) 101 and LIFE 201 programs at Southern Maine Community College in Portland. Two & three week residential programs immersed students in practicing organization, home management, vocational awareness, independent travel, self-advocacy, and social skills. These DBVI programs included explicit instruction, community based instruction, volunteer opportunities, and paid work experiences.
- Summer Transition Workshop at the University of Maine in Augusta. This one week experience included a campus tour, instruction on differences between high school and college and accessing accommodations in college, and workshops to increase self-confidence, understand self-disclosure, and interviewing skills. Additionally, participants job shadowed employees at several local employers.
- Biddeford High School's Summer Work Program employed students from three high schools at several local employers and provided peer mentors to help develop work readiness and independent living skills.
- Massabesic High School's Summer Work Program engaged with nine employers and sixteen students, who also received peer mentoring to improve work readiness and independence skills. Six of the sixteen students landed jobs at the end of the summer!
- Eastern Maine Community College's Summer Work Experience Program offered six weeks of work experiences in three job settings and career exploration workshops daily. Students from Bangor, Orono, Old Town, and Hampden participated in the program.
- We-Do Summer Work Program placed seven Lake Region Vocational Center students in five-week paid work experiences. Students also worked with peer mentors.
- Lewiston VR's Summer Work Experience represented a partnership with Fryeburg Academy, Spruce Mountain High School, Leavitt High School, and Poland Regional High School. Community Rehabilitation Providers partnered to provide employability skill workshops and establish work experiences with numerous local employers. Several students have been offered full-time employment since their summer experiences.
- Dexter High School's Summer Work Experience extended students' class work and school-year work-based learning experiences into paid work. Several students were offered part-time jobs through their summer work.
- The Career Exploration Program provided weekly work readiness activities with DVR, including self-awareness regarding skills and interests, career opportunities, and job applications, as part of the Extended School Year program at both Kennebunk High School and Scarborough High School.