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RespectAbility – Public Comments – Michigan Unified State Plan

“Hiring Michiganders with disabilities would change the dynamic for many companies across our state. There are more than 500,000 working-age adults whose talent could move a company to the next level – but they need to be given a chance first. We are working to implement more inclusive employment policies at the state level and are ready to encourage businesses statewide to do the same with this tour. The time is long overdue to celebrate different abilities in the workplace.” – [Lt. Governor Brian Calley, MI Hidden Talent tour, March 17, 2015](#)

“Employers that hire disabled people are ultimately rewarded with team members who bring passion, energy, and loyalty to the workplace. Disabled employees rally their fellow workers and serve as a unified force who can teach the values of resiliency, compassion, and understanding. More often than not, people who have infirm bodies also possess the strongest souls and the most powerful spirits, traits which enhance the workplace and our economy as a whole. People with disabilities are hardworking, energetic, and engaged people who will be loyal to their employer. The offer of employment for a disabled person is a game changer – they do more and achieve more because they are thrilled to have been given an opportunity.” – [Justice Richard Bernstein.](#)

RespectAbility is pleased to submit the following comments regarding the current draft of the State of Michigan’s Unified Plan as required under Section 102 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). We are pleased to have this opportunity to offer our comments, raise our questions, and provide our suggestions about the content of Michigan’s state plan.

Today Michigan has the opportunity to work hard to improve outcomes in terms of competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities. According to Census data from 2013, Michigan ranks 44th in the country in terms of their employment rate of people with disabilities. **Only 29.9% of the 684,000 working age Michiganders with disabilities are employed. Further, there are over 48,500 youth with disabilities and each year a quarter of them will age out of school into an uncertain future.**

A good example of the uncertainties facing Michigan’s disability community is the issue of not pulling down the full federal match of funding for VR. In 2014, Michigan Rehabilitation Services had to return \$19 million dollars to Washington, D.C. because the state budget failed to come up with adequate matching funds. We address this issue in detail in our comments below.

Despite poor performance metrics in the past, Michigan has many of the ingredients essential to future success. The state plan includes critical data points, discusses outreach to key businesses, and points to growing sectors to set Michigan on a path to expand job opportunities for people with disabilities. Michigan has much to learn from other states that have worked hard to achieve improved employment outcomes. Other states have higher than 50% employment rates for their citizens with disabilities. [States like the Dakotas, Alaska, and Wyoming have achieved increase results by putting best practices into places.](#) The experience of these states shows ways that Michigan can dramatically improve their outcomes. **Likewise, we are also seeing pockets of excellence around innovative youth programs designed to address disability employment in [Georgia](#), [Nevada](#), and [Kentucky](#).**

To help the states succeed in this [process we developed a resource called the Disability Employment First Planning Tool](#). This document details best practices and effective models. This toolkit contains models that are proven to work, be cost effective to implement, and be successful. [We have developed an extensive collection of data on disability and employment in Michigan](#). That information is attached to our comments.

Our public comments on Michigan’s WIOA State Plan are structured around those points where greater clarity, precision, and data are needed to ensure that people with disabilities will be better equipped to pursue the American Dream. From the accessibility of the workforce system to employer engagement to investing in transition programs for youth with disabilities, our comments are intended to help Michigan push hard to see improved integrated employment outcomes for Michiganders with disabilities.

1. Build on the work done through the MI Hidden Talent Tour and make busting stigmas, myths, and misconceptions a key part of Michigan’s workforce strategy:

Low expectations and misconceptions are critical barriers to employment for people with disabilities. [A Princeton study shows that while people with disabilities are seen as warm, they are not seen as competent](#). Similarly, [a study published by Cornell Hospitality Quarterly found that companies share a concern that people with disabilities cannot adequately do the work required of their employees](#). **We therefore recommend that the Michigan’s State Plan be amended to include a comprehensive proactive communications/public relations strategy for reducing such stigmas.** Indeed, we know that other groups of Michiganders with barriers to work also face stigmas, especially those leaving the corrections system.

As stated in the introduction to public comments, Michigan has many of the ingredients essential to improving employment outcomes for its citizens with disabilities. One of the necessary first steps is to have key state leaders who understood the value that employees with disabilities possess and who know how to communicate the business imperative for hiring diverse talent. [The work already done by Lieutenant Governor Caley and Justice Bernstein has been remarkable](#). Their Hidden Talent Tour has set the stage for expanding job opportunities for people with disabilities in the years ahead. This fact is recognized explicitly in the Unified State Plan on page 24 where it discusses Michigan Rehabilitation Services’ Business Services Initiative. The Plan states that “Michigan Rehabilitation Services, in partnership with the Governor’s office, has jointly created a blueprint for government and business to work together to develop business solutions, identify best practices, and outline steps that can be put in place to increase the employment and retention of individuals with disabilities.” This is critical work that will ultimately be a win-win-win for people, business, and taxpayers alike.

In order to ensure that such efforts have the biggest possible impact, it needs to be supported by a serious, systematic and ongoing communications campaign that highlights the benefits of inclusive hiring. Indeed, the best way to fight stigmas is to let employers see the facts from other employers who are already succeeding by hiring people with disabilities. In terms of potential employer partners, we encourage your state plan to look at the [Disability Equality Index that assesses the inclusion and hiring efforts of major employers](#). It was put together by the United States Business Leadership Network (USBLN) which operates [a network of affiliates across the country that can be an incredible resource for your work](#). The companies which scored 100% in the USBLN index can be a great resource. These are Ameren Corporation, AT&T, Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., Capital One Financial Corporation, Comcast, NBCUniversal, Ernst & Young LLP, Florida Blue, Freddie Mac, Highmark Health, JPMorgan Chase & Co.,

Lockheed Martin Corporation, Northrop Grumman Corporation, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), Procter & Gamble, Qualcomm Incorporated, Sprint Corporation, Starbucks Coffee Company, and TD Bank N.A.

Polls and focus groups show that there are three types of messages and audiences that are needed to expand employment for people with disabilities. Serious communications campaigns are needed for all three:

- A. CEOs/business leaders need to understand the value proposition/business case for their specific company as to why they should focus on putting people with disabilities into their talent pipelines.** This is best done through business-to-business success stories. Already, the State Plan talks about using “Governor’s Business to Business Summit as a foundation” and how it has brought together “major Michigan businesses.” Those businesses need to share their success stories and to talk about how people with disabilities can be extremely capable and loyal workers. While there are few Stephen Hawking — with or without disabilities — people with disabilities can work highly successfully in hotels, healthcare, tend our parks and facilities, assist aging seniors, and be super talents in developing computer software and engineering solutions. CEOs and business leaders need to know that people with disabilities can be the BEST people to get a job done.
- B. Human resources professionals and on-the-ground supervisors need to understand that hiring people with disabilities is generally easy and inexpensive, and that any costs incurred are more than offset from increased loyalty.** Hiring managers and supervisors are key implementers who can turn high minded policy and business goals into action at the ground level. However, studies show that many of them are afraid of what they don’t know about people with disabilities. They are afraid of potential legal action, costs, or other failures. For them, they need supports that will empower to overcome their own fears and to excel at recruiting, hiring, supervising or working with teammates with disabilities. Michigan’s VR staff and community agencies can fully support human resources professionals and managers in dealing with their own specific fears and stigmas surrounding hiring people with disabilities. Moreover, online and in-person training is readily available to help from a variety of sources. RespectAbility has online webinars, as [does ASKJAN.org](#), USDOL and others. Partners like [the Poses Family Foundation Workplace Initiative](#) can provide training to the workforce staff and volunteers systems-wide as well as to community agencies in supporting companies through messaging efforts around related to fear and stigma. [The National Organization on Disability](#) and [the U.S. Business Leadership Network](#) offer strong resources.
- C. People with disabilities and their families need high expectations. From the time of diagnosis, education for high expectations must begin. Michigan’s new Employment First policy needs to be supported by a PR campaign that will inspire Michiganders with disabilities to reach for the stars.** Already, Michigan has a person with differences who has accomplished much and deserves recognition for his achievements. Justice Richard Bernstein is a prime example of the heights that people with disabilities can achieve. His example and the example of others should be highlighted to inspire others. For example, Virgin Airways founder Sir [Richard Branson](#) and finance wizard [Charles Schwab](#) are dyslexic. Scientist Stephen Hawking and multi-billionaire businessman Sheldon Adelson, like Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas and President Franklin D. Roosevelt before them, are wheelchair/mobility device users.

The CEO of Wynn Casinos, Steve Wynn, is legally blind. Arthur Young, co-founder of the giant EY (formerly Ernst & Young) was deaf. Success sells success and that is something the workforce system should seriously utilize in an intentional manner moving forward.

This type of effort needs to begin at the highest levels of state government. In other states, **Governors have been incredible role models on this front – bringing media to best practices of inclusive employment.** Governors Jack Markell of Delaware, Jay Inslee of Washington, and Scott Walker of Wisconsin have all done this extensively. The media appearances made by these Governors have been vital in demonstrating the business case for hiring people with disabilities. **This type of systematic and ongoing communications campaign must continue if you want to maximize your success.**

It is also critical that Michigan VR staff and community agencies be prepared to support companies in dealing with their specific fears and stigmas. **Partners like the Poses Family Foundation Workplace Initiative can provide training to Michigan Rehabilitation Service staff as well as community agencies in supporting Michigan companies through messaging efforts around related to fear and stigma.**

Stigmas and the Situation in Flint will be vital to address as well. Low expectations are causing people in Flint to discuss the reduction of childbirth as an overreaction to the higher levels of disability risk in Flint that result from lead paint issues. It is vital to get the people of Flint clean water. At the same time, it is vital to recognize that people who experience the negative impacts of lead issues are still equal human beings who also will have talents and abilities to nurture and share in the future. **A PR campaign to remind people that the children of Flint should have high expectations and outcomes is critical.**

2. Strong Sector Strategies- The need for strategic alignment of workforce development and economic development to expand employment for people with disabilities:

As required by WIOA Sec. 102(b)(1)(A) Michigan's state plan must and does include a detailed analysis of the economic sectors of the state economy that are growing and are forecasted to grow in the future. The success of WIOA depends on being an employer driven paradigm shift. **Expanding opportunities for people with barriers to employment such as disability requires strong partnerships with employers in those sectors which are rapidly expanding. Economic, Workforce, and Workforce Development Activities Analysis of Michigan's State Plan contains the greatest detail of any state plan that we have reviewed.**

In terms of thinking about employment for people with disabilities, we suggest focusing on the economic forecasts contained in Figure 21 on page 14. This chart, which shows Michigan's Top 20 Emerging/Long-Term In-Demand Industries, offers a critical point for improving outcomes. Specifically, it will be vital to train and prepare Michiganders with disabilities to pursue careers in the fields which are most likely to grow in the immediate future. We would submit that the talents of people with disabilities are an untapped resource that can be channel into these emerging "In-Demand Industries." This can be accomplished by developing sector specific strategies. Below, we offer our specific ideas where we see the most potential:

A. Health and Elder Care

The State Plan projects extensive job growth in the fields of “Ambulatory Health Care Services” and “Social Assistance.” Specifically, the field of Social Assistance the Figure shows a 25.6% growth with 85,320 jobs by 2022 and in Ambulatory Services, an astounding 231,340 jobs drive by a 21.6% increase. **People with disabilities can and should be part of the solution to this critical demand in the labor market.** To quote [a 2014 report from the Office of Disability Employment Policy \(ODEP\)](#), “[people with disabilities] not only represent an untapped talent pool, but also offer significant value and insight” in the field of healthcare. Indeed, it is important for healthcare institutions to reflect their customers, and people with disabilities interface more with the healthcare system. There are [numerous examples of young people with disabilities doing incredible work in the fields of healthcare, elder care, and in assisted living](#). **Employers working in health and elder care can greatly benefit from the loyalty, dedication, and retention rates of employees with disabilities.**

While it is briefly elsewhere in the plan on page 78, Project Search should be significantly expanded as they have done in Wisconsin, Florida and other states. Nationally, each year approximately 2,700 such young people, spread out in 45 states, do a nine-month, school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. This innovative, business-led model features total workplace immersion, which facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and worksite-based training and support. To name a few select locations, Project Search already exists in Michigan at [Beaumont Health Systems](#), [Blue Cross Blue Shield in Detroit](#), and [Spectrum Health in Grand Rapids](#). These Project Search sites overall have been achieving outstanding results for people with disabilities, employers, and taxpayers alike. For example, [the first longitudinal study of the program found “a 68% success rate in transitioning students from high school into competitive employment” and “Project SEARCH sites in Upstate New York that have an impressive 83% success rate overall.”](#) The goal for each program participant is competitive employment.

As Michigan looks for ways to expand Project Search, we highly encourage you to learn from your neighbors in Wisconsin. The experiences of the dedicated state officials, VR counselors, workforce professionals, and special educators who have increased Wisconsin’s Project Search programs offer profound insights in the steps necessary to make rapid expansion a reality. In the long term investments in Project Search and other such programs will save big money for taxpayers while also strengthening the talent pool for employers.

B. Science, Tech, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and The Autism Advantage

As has been documented in many cases, there can be an “Autism Advantage” in the STEM space. Indeed, some people on the Autism spectrum can have the very best skills in science, math and engineering. [Microsoft](#), [SAP](#), and [Specialisterne](#) have committed themselves to “[provide employment opportunities for people on the autism spectrum in roles such as software testers, programmers, system administrators, and data quality assurance specialists.](#)” [The Israeli Defense Forces recruits and trains their citizens on the Autism spectrum for work in their elite intelligence unit.](#)

Delaware’s Governor Jack Markell is partnering with companies to employ more people on the Autism spectrum in STEM jobs. Such examples need to be implemented by Michigan as well. **This issue of STEM and access for student with disabilities is a natural point of partnership between the workforce system and the educational system.** That work needs to

start young, be matched with high expectations for success, and designed to ensure people with disabilities have the chance to become future scientists, engineers, doctors and mathematicians.

Ensuring the Accessibility of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Programs and Careers for People with Disabilities, especially Students with IEPs, is vital. As Carol Glazer of the National Organization on Disabilities wrote in *Huffington Post*, [“America is already lagging when it comes to STEM-skilled workers. The U.S. will have more than 1.2 million job openings in STEM fields by 2018.”](#) Governors in other states have looked at STEM needs and begun to develop solutions. For example, [in New York State Governor Cuomo has ensured that magnet schools for STEM are located near IBM, a major STEM employer in their state.](#) Michigan should follow this model.

C. High Turnover Jobs: Accommodations/hotels, Distribution/supply chain/Retail

Millions of dollars are lost each year due to employee turnover. [For all jobs earning less than \\$50,000 per year, the average cost of replacing one employee is between \\$6,000 and \\$20,000.](#) Research shows that employees with disabilities, when their interests and abilities are aligned with the needs of employers, are more productive and loyal than their non-disabled peers. Company records show that even when the relatively more expensive accommodations were factored in, the overall costs of disability accommodations were far outweighed by the low turnover rates and better tenures of the employees with disabilities.

A great example of an employment sector where employees with disabilities can be tremendously successful is the hospitality industry. Accommodations and food service are extremely high turnover jobs and numerous studies show that people with disabilities can be outstanding in those fields and have significantly higher employer loyalty.

An outstanding example of the type of work needed is found in Missouri. As part of the Poses Family Foundation’s Workplace Initiative, a coalition of employment service providers has launched a successful training and placement program with the hospitality sector in St. Louis. This training runs for up to 12 weeks, and takes place on site at the hotel; all participants are paid by the hotel for the duration of training. Since the summer of 2015, two cohorts of trainees have completed training at the Hyatt Regency. Trainees have gone on to permanent employment at the Hyatt and other hotel partners in a range of departments—culinary; auditing; and customer service. This type of training and Poses’ Workplace Initiative could easily be part of your overall Sector Strategies.

Likewise, in other states, [hotels and other hospitality employers have found Project SEARCH to be an amazing source of talent. The work done by Embassy Suites and David Scott in Omaha, Nebraska offers valuable lessons that can enable Michigan to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities.](#) Michigan’s state Board, along with other components of the workforce system, should connect with employers in the hospitality sector to begin figuring out how to benefit from these models.

Another sector with high turnover and big potential are distribution/supply chains. Many companies, including [UPS](#), [Wal-Mart](#), and [OfficeMax have proven records of success.](#) [Walgreens has demonstrated that workers with disabilities in their distribution centers are as productive, safer, and turn over less when compared to peers without disabilities.](#) These efforts have taken the logistics sector by storm with [Lowe's](#), [OfficeMax](#), [Pepsi](#), as well as [P&G](#) are all launching their own successful disability hiring initiatives. For example, [as reported by the National Organization on Disability, “Lowe’s hired more than 150 new workers with disabilities in the first year, and an additional 250 workers in the following 18-month period.”](#) They can be

outstanding partners for disability employment as these industries suffer from high turnover rates and PwDs are proven to have significantly higher retention rates. It is important to identify more specific opportunities with employers and to site them inside the plan, as well as the criteria by which to continue and to expand such partnerships in the future. **Another great example is Starbucks.** Their “[Inclusion Academy](#)” has rapidly grown from just a pilot program in Carson Valley, NJ to a complete program at their largest roasting plant.

3. Ensure that the best data points, including the Labor Force Participation Rates of people with disabilities v. those without disabilities, are used performance metrics:

As we expressed in our introduction, it is our view that Michigan has many of the most essential ingredients needed to for achieving greater outcomes and higher employment rates for people with disabilities. Sustaining this success will very much depend on making sure Michigan’s leaders have access to the right data. **It is vital that the workforce system and the State Board include the labor force participation rates of people with disabilities on their state dashboards and performance metrics.** Looking solely at unemployment information, decision makers are missing the bigger picture of those individuals with barriers to employment who are not actively seeking work.

As such we want to extend our deep compliments on the level of detail devoted in Michigan’s Unified State Plan to the issue of labor force participation rates (LFPR) for people with disabilities. As required by Section 102(b)(1)(B) of WIOA, each state plan must discuss “individuals with barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities.” Michigan does so with a greater degree of detail and attention than any others state plan that we have reviewed. **The data presented on page 1 in Figure 9 will be essential as Michigan’s state leaders move forward with WIOA. We will be highlighting this level detail as the standard other states should endeavor to emulate.** We hope that this data will be use to develop and implement the performance metrics needed to guide resource investment and workforce programs.

We do, however, have one caveat to add. Precision is essential when using statistics to advance policy proposals. As such, we hope this section of Michigan’s Unified State Plan be revised to include the distinction between working age and retirement age people with disabilities. Further, it is also critical to include data on youth with disabilities, specifically those between 16 and 20. Those are crucial years where investing in work experiences can empower them to pursue a lifetime of work and independence.

4. Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act and Federal Contractors offer Michigan the chance to innovate, collaborate, and expand opportunity:

While there is a great deal of data and detail in the current draft of Michigan’s Unified State Plan, there is also a significant omission. **Specifically, the State Plan lacks any references to the employment opportunities and talent challenges created by the Section 503 regulations and federal contractors.** [Michigan’s Plan does not discuss at all the new 7% utilization goal set for companies to recruit, hire, and retain qualified individuals with disabilities in all job categories.](#)

Michigan needs to respond to the opportunity created by Section 503 with a strategy focused on competitive advantage, not just compliance. These regulations and requirements entail far more than just new rules for businesses to play by. **Section 503 is an opportunity that could potentially have a broad impact on the employer engagement work of the entire workforce system.** The companies who must comply with Section 503 have an opportunity to

teach companies not impacted by the regulations how to effectively employ, engage, and retain workers or customers with disabilities.

Michigan is fortunate to be home to the operations of several massive businesses with extensive federal contractors. For example, General Dynamics Corp., Emergent Biosolutions Inc., BAE Systems PLC, Kelly Services Inc., and Kellogg Company all do business with the federal government from within Michigan. Each of these companies is looking for solutions to the Section 503 challenge and this is an opportunity that should not be missed.

5. Making the Most of Limited Resources – Finding Solutions to VR Funding Challenges

The contributions of Michigan Rehabilitation Services are woven throughout the Unified State Plan. **It is clear that MRS is guided by committed professionals and focused efforts. For example, in 2012, VR staff was able to obtain 7,816 jobs for Michiganders with disabilities. Despite these outcomes, in 2014, Michigan relinquished \$19,558,448 back to the federal government which then sent it to other states because they failed to come up with the local match.** This is funding that could have gone directly to improve employment outcomes and empowering people with disabilities in Michigan.

While we fully recognize that states often times have strict financial constraints that limit their ability to invest in success, we also submit that innovative thinking and collaboration can overcome such limitations. **We would highly encourage state leaders in Michigan to connect with several incredible champions of change in the state of Iowa.** The Hawkeye State offers numerous examples of overcoming barriers, engaging employers, and innovating in ways that can help improve opportunities in Michigan. **Iowa is an example of a state that had initially failed to spend its full federal match but has since worked to maximize available resources. In 2014, Iowa failed to spend \$2,314,114 for its general population and \$596,085 for blind individuals. However, with strong leadership from Governor Branstad and David Mitchell, Director of Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation, things are looking up. Iowa is now receiving full federal funding.** Iowa should serve as a model for the rest of the nation on how utilizing resources is a win-win-win for states, taxpayers and people with disabilities. In Iowa, their vocational rehabilitation agency has even experienced success in employing people with vision impairment at 82% which is the second in the nation. Speaking about his state's efforts, David Mitchell said that his agency had "...worked collaboratively with the Governor's Office and the legislative branch and are expected to draw down full federal funds for this budget cycle." Iowa VR's success built upon support from a "a multi-system effort occurring leveraging funds and resources through various efforts to provide financial and technical assistance to community providers and direct service staff across the state promoting employment and a better bottom line for business." **Michigan's leaders have the chance to learn and work hard to improve outcomes even with limited resources.**

6. Beware "Order of Selection" and Utilize a "Jackie Robinson Strategy":

The workforce system only gets one chance with new employers to make a good impression. By law, policy, and custom, the system looks to serve people with the most significant disabilities first. However, if they are not the right match for the employer, it will only undermine our long term goals. Thus it is vital to also use a "Jackie Robinson Strategy" to make sure that the right talent gets into the right positions so it is win-win for the employer and worker alike. As the first African-American to play major league baseball, Robinson tore down decades of discrimination and blazed a trail for other talented and diverse athletes to follow. He

was the talent that his employer needed, and contributed to the bottom line. Because, stigma and misconception remain a critical obstacle and one that Michigan's workforce system needs to focus on, sometimes the best way to help people with more significant disabilities in the long term is to start with new employers by placing talent with fewer disabilities first. Once they understand accommodations and how to maximize the use of talent, they will be ready to more broadly open their employment "tents".

7. Overcome the gap between disability services and career services in Post-Secondary Education:

There is a fundamental disconnect in most post-secondary education programs between disability services and careers. This is not a new issue and it is one that other organizations have raised in the past. However, with the priorities put into place by the implementation of WIOA, there is a historic opportunity to bridge this gap and to improve career and technical education for young people with and without differences. As formulated by the National Organization on Disability, at most educational institutions, "the career services office, which assists students in preparing for" the workforce ["lack a strong—or any—connection to the office of disabled student services, which ensures proper accessibility and accommodations on campus for students with disabilities."](#)

The result is a price we pay as a society is twofold. First, it costs employers who are unable to find qualified job candidates. Second, it costs students with disabilities who may be able to graduate with a degree thanks to accommodations but will go on to struggle to succeed in the working world. Nationally, there are 1.3 million young Americans ages 16-20 with disabilities. [They have high expectations to go into the workforce but currently only 53% of college graduates with disabilities are employed](#) as opposed to 84% of graduates with no disability. In total, only about 7% of people with disabilities will earn a college degree and less than half of the 2.3 million with a degree are employed.

An opportunity clearly exists within the current draft of Michigan's Unified State Plan. On pages 44 and 75, the Plan discusses how "Michigan Rehabilitation Services is currently partnering with Michigan State University" to finalize the details needed in order to "place a vocational rehabilitation counselor on campus who will provide wrap-around services to eligible students with disabilities." **This is a critical opportunity and we are encouraged to see what comes of these efforts. As the university staff and VR counselors work together, we hope they will overcome the gap that we discussed above.** It is critical that they efforts be directly to improving and supporting the ultimate success of students with disabilities.

[Due to the mandate created by Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, federal contractors now have a utilization goal to make sure that 7% of their employees across all job groups be qualified people with disabilities.](#) This regulation is actually a huge opportunity because companies are actively looking to hire recent graduates with disabilities. The first place for new recruits is college and campus recruiting. Michigan has the chance to demonstrate to business that college students with disabilities are on campuses and that they should be actively targeting those with disabilities just as they do all other diversity recruiting on college campuses.

While the statistics cited above are national ones, they have bearing on the work that needs to be done through your community college system. Beyond just WIOA, community colleges are uniquely positioned to innovate in order to expand opportunity. Community colleges are very closely connected to the working world and the specific training requirements of employers. As you look to triangulate between employer needs, skills training, and recruiting

workers; you will do well to remember the importance of getting students with disabilities connected to career services and prepared for the workplace early.

8. Ensure that Apprenticeship Programs are Fully Accessible and Actively Recruiting Young People with Disabilities, Especially with Government Contractors

We are pleased that Michigan is looking to expand the vital opportunity that apprenticeship training can offer to young people with disabilities. At the federal level, the Office of Disability Employment Policy has worked hard to generate resources which can open up these exciting programs to “youth and young adults with a full range of disabilities.” The regulations related to apprenticeship which have recently come out of the Department of Labor provide states the flexibility they need to refine and design training programs that maximally inclusive of people with diverse talents. [We encourage you to invest time and energy to understand the best practices contained in ODEP’s apprenticeship toolkit.](#)

9. Prioritize pre-employment training and expand partnerships with VR

We are delighted with the commitments detailed on page 78 that discuss how “Michigan Rehabilitative Services has been selected by the Governor’s Commission on Mental Health and Wellness to lead expansion activities related to Project SEARCH sites throughout Michigan.” We are very pleased to see the increasing collaboration of agencies on youth transition issues. As much as we would encourage your state to follow Florida and Wisconsin’s example by working hard to expand the number of Project SEARCH sites, this is not the only paradigm that you should follow. The school system, vocational rehabilitation, and local workforce boards can build creative, collaborative partnerships with companies that are leading in the disability space.

As you embark on your new strong collaborations, we encourage you to explore proven programs such as Amazon, UPS, and Pepsi. The global logistics companies UPS, at one of their busiest facilities, there is a training program dedicated to preparing youth with disabilities to succeed. Taking place in Louisville, KY, [The Transitional Learning Center is the result of a partnership between an employer, the school system, and vocational rehabilitation.](#) Pre-training programs are great because they offer the opportunity to train youth with disabilities in the soft skills they need to succeed and provide them with a foundation of work experience.

Michigan should also look at other models of innovation that are showing great potential to fundamentally improve employment outcomes. To begin with, we would highly recommend that Michigan examine how to support disability employment efforts through establishment of public/private partnerships in local communities. These types of partnerships could focus on the “cluster” model, started by Poses Family Foundation that is having tremendous success in diverse states as Nevada, Georgia, and Ohio. [This model depends on “consortium of employers committed to implement or expand programs”, “a public/private partnership to coordinate services for job-seekers with disabilities, with a single point of contact for employers”, and “Connections among employers, public and private agencies, and schools to reach young adults with disabilities who are in transition from school to work.”](#)

10. Avoid the Opportunity Costs of Focusing Too Much on One-Stop Centers. Programmatic Accessibility is Critical Important

Public policy is about the allocation of scarce resources to meet infinite needs. It is vital to invest resources on those points where they can have the greatest effect. **One challenge that we have seen in many states WIOA plan has been the prioritization of expensive bricks and mortar One-Stops as the primary access point for programs and services under WIOA.** Focusing exhaustively on One-Stop Centers, physical infrastructure, and co-locating services comes at the opportunity cost of losing the chance to improve supports and increase outcomes.

The workforce needs of state economies are evolving rapidly thanks to technology and globalization. Investing excessive resources on physical locations at the expense of improving online delivery of workforce services and supports is an example of looking backwards, not forwards. Moreover, [the District of Columbia and others have successfully moved much of their one-stop services to trained staff with laptops that go to schools, hospitals, and community organizations where they are better able to serve the public.](#)

11. Transportation is a vital component and it must be addressed directly:

Many people with disabilities do not drive. Others cannot afford private transportation. It is vital to work with public transportation to ensure that there are bus routes to places where there are internships, apprenticeships and other work opportunities. In places where that are not possible, Michigan could look at partnering with UBER and other new transportation solutions. Indeed, for people with disabilities who drive, such companies as UBER can also provide a way to enter into the workforce with flexible hours. Public sector employers and federal contractors who have 503 obligations are key places for apprenticeships and internships and onboarding of talent. It is important for them to play a key role in planning for public transportation.

12. Getting Out the Word on Free and Accessible Services and Resources:

There are many online and in person resources to help employers and people with disabilities come together to build success. However, all the stakeholders need to be educated to know that these resources exist, and that they are free and user-friendly. These resources must also all be accessible. **Also, Michigan should be careful not to waste money trying to re-invent the wheel in creating online resources as ASKJAN.org, [the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment](http://theUSDepartmentofLabor.gov) Policy, [our organization and others also offer free toolkits, webinars and training opportunities](#). [Another resource is Understood.org](http://Understood.org).** This is a comprehensive resource to help families and individuals with learning and attention issues build their educational and career plans. It will be helpful to collaborate with those groups however to ensure that the best tools are created to fit the training and information needs on these issues.

13. Nothing About Us Without Us:

“Nothing About Us without Us” has long been a rallying cry for the one in five American who have a disability and it has implications for the workforce system. Even a non-voting member of a WIB can bring critical perspectives that improve the WIB’s efforts. **As such we recommend that your state plan look at adopting language which would include the placement of a representative from the disability community and a representative of your state’s VR system on your State Board.** Second, the State Plan could also direct local workforce boards to connect with local community organizations to recruit self-advocates to add their perspectives.

14. Aging workers and those with recently acquired disabilities must be specifically addressed in the plan:

Many people who have been in the workforce for decades find that before full retirement age they cannot keep up with the physical demands of their jobs. In Iowa, IVRS works with a major employer, Unity Point Hospital to “re-home” employees to other jobs within the same company when good workers can no longer do physical jobs and need a new assignment. They find that Emergency Room nurses, for example, come to a point where they can no longer keep up with the physical demands of that job. They have a department that works to “re-home” talented and valued employees who either age into a disability or acquire a disability through accident or illness. Empowering youth with disabilities to enter the workforce should be your highest priority, but keeping aging workers in the workforce until retirement age is also important. This will take a specific strategy and effort so that you don’t have massive numbers of people going onto disability rolls and out of the workplace prematurely.

15. Strategic Engagement to Build a Buddy/Mentor System for People Customers of the Workforce System.

Government can't and shouldn't do everything. There is a massive role that can be played by trained and vetted volunteers who are willing to help people with barriers to work find and keep jobs. Faith-based organizations and many others can fill massive gaps. [There is a terrific booklet, Clearing Obstacles to Work, put out by the Philanthropy Roundtable that is rich with potential partners and proven programs.](#) This is a huge missed opportunity as you will see in the booklet we just mentioned above. It's all about teaching people to fish (helping them get and keep a job) rather than just giving them fish.

It is also important to note in terms of the SNAP and TANF programs that too many faith-based programs focus on giving out food without giving out the volunteer support to help people sustain themselves through gainful employment. [In looking to rethinking policies around SNAP funding, we suggest looking at the innovative efforts of the Seattle Jobs Initiative \(SJI\) to realign that funding into more productive, employment outcomes.](#)

16. The disability issues of people involved in the corrections system must be addressed:

There are several points where the current draft of Michigan's Unified State Plan addresses the unique workforce challenges facing ex-offenders as they attempt to reenter society. For example, page 40 discusses the "Fidelity Bonding Program", page 43 which details the agreement in place between Michigan Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Corrections and the State Court Administrative Offices, and page 46 which talks about the One Detroit Demonstration Project. **These instances show that Michigan's workforce system is aligning to improve outcomes for people transitioning out of prison and back into society.** However, these efforts need to be viewed through the lens of disability. The reason why is simple.

[According to recently published data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "An estimated 32% of prisoners and 40% of jail inmates reported having at least one disability." This issue is a serious one and it needs to be addressed at the state level.](#) Frequently people are involved in the criminal justice system because they have disability issues, including learning differences, ADHD, executive function, and mental health issues that went undiagnosed and/or unaddressed through childhood and into the school years. Given these statistics from the BJS, it is vital that your state identify how many of the individuals in the ex-offender pipeline have disabilities. Serving ex-offenders is a critical workforce development challenge and one that can only increase when disability is a factor and it is not addressed appropriately. The price paid for ignoring this issue are higher rates of recidivism and greater costs to society. Assessment tools are needed to identify disability issues as people enter the prison system. Doing so creates opportunities to address those issues productively. If people in the corrections system who will be released eventually are to be well served by Michigan's workforce system, then it is vital that disability issues be identified and addressed in a way that will help work successfully in the future.

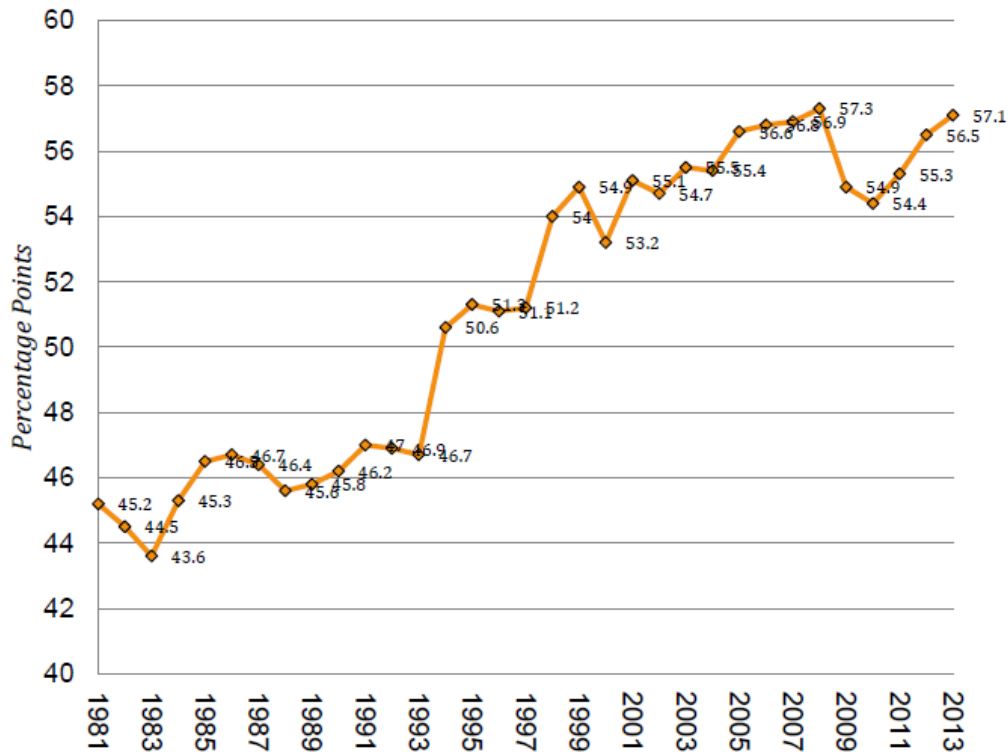
Conclusion

Michigan can and must do better in terms of jobs for people with disabilities. This is an issue that Michigan has the opportunity to address because of WIOA and it must be addressed through the State Plan. Failing to properly train and prepare job seekers with disabilities costs our state's economy incredible talent and shatters the aspirations of so many people with disabilities who want to pursue the American Dream, just like everyone else.

The bottom line is that expanding job opportunities for people with disabilities is a win-win-win for employers, taxpayers and people with disabilities alike. It is good for employers because the loyalty, talent, and skills of workers with disabilities contribute to the employers' bottom line. It is good for the workforce system because improving services and supports for job seeker with disabilities will benefit others with different barriers to employment. It is good for people with disabilities who want the dignity, pride, friendships, independence and income that work provides. We are happy to answer any questions you have and to help in any way.

We have included a chart below which looks at the gap in workforce participation between those with and without disabilities nationally over time. As seen in the chart, as women and minorities have been able to make significant strides in joining the workforce, people with disabilities have not. We know that by maximizing Michigan’s WIOA plan’s potential that all of this can change for the better for the people of our state.

Chart 1 – The gap nationally in workforce participation rates between people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.



Source for chart is the Disabilities Compendium.

Below are two data tables that provide detailed information ranking the states in terms of employment rates for people with disabilities as well as the employment gap between people with and without disabilities. This has been added to show you where Michigan ranks nationally and to showcase several of the data points needed in Michigan’s WIOA State Plan.

Table 1 Ranking 50 States by Employment Rates and Employment Gap

Data Source- Column 1: Table 2.1: Employment—Civilians with Disabilities Ages 18 to 64 Years Living in the Community for the United States and States: 2013 from the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium

Data Source-Column 2: Table 2.9: Employment Gap—Civilians Ages 18 to 64 Years Living in the Community for the United States and States, by Disability Status: 2013 from the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium

Link: <http://disabilitycompendium.org/compendium-statistics/employment>

Column 1 Ranking of States by Employment Rate of People with Disabilities			Column 2 Ranking of States by the Employment Gap between People with disabilities and people without disabilities				
#	State	% of PWDs Employed	#	State	% of PWDs Employed	% of People without Disabilities Employed	Employment Gap as a %
1	North Dakota	52.8	1	Alaska	47.8	75.2	27.4
2	Wyoming	50.7	2	Wyoming	50.7	79.4	28.7
3	South Dakota	48.1	3	North Dakota	52.8	83.1	30.3
4	Alaska	47.8	4	Nevada	39.2	73.1	33.9
5	Minnesota	46	5	Utah	42.5	76.6	34.1
6	Nebraska	45.5	6	New Mexico	35.3	70.1	34.8
7	Iowa	44.8	7	South Dakota	48.1	83	34.9
8	Utah	42.5	8	Colorado	42.3	77.3	35
9	Colorado	42.3	9	Texas	38.7	74.7	36
10	New Hampshire	41.8	10	Minnesota	46	82.1	36.1
11	Kansas	41.7	11	Connecticut	40	76.4	36.4
12	Wisconsin	40.9	12	Hawaii	39.1	75.7	36.6
13	Connecticut	40	13	Nebraska	45.5	82.6	37.1
14	Maryland	40	14	Iowa	44.8	82.1	37.3
15	Montana	39.4	15	Kansas	41.7	79	37.3
16	Nevada	39.2	16	Montana	39.4	76.8	37.4
17	Hawaii	39.1	17	Arizona	33.6	71.3	37.7
18	Texas	38.7	18	Maryland	40	78.3	38.3
19	Virginia	36.9	19	Washington	36.4	74.7	38.3
20	Idaho	36.7	20	California	32.7	71.1	38.4
21	New Jersey	36.6	21	Idaho	36.7	75.2	38.5
22	Delaware	36.4	22	New Hampshire	41.8	80.3	38.5
23	Washington	36.4	23	New Jersey	36.6	75.1	38.5
24	Illinois	36.1	24	Delaware	36.4	75.1	38.7
25	Oklahoma	35.8	25	Oregon	35.2	73.9	38.7
26	New Mexico	35.3	26	Illinois	36.1	75	38.9
27	Oregon	35.2	27	Wisconsin	40.9	80.1	39.2
28	Massachusetts	34.9	28	Oklahoma	35.8	75.2	39.4

29	Rhode Island	34.3	29	Georgia	31.5	71.5	40
30	Pennsylvania	33.9	30	Virginia	36.9	76.9	40
31	Indiana	33.8	31	Louisiana	31.3	72.4	41.1
32	Arizona	33.6	32	New York	32.2	73.3	41.1
33	Ohio	33.5	33	Florida	30.5	72.2	41.7
34	Vermont	33.3	34	Pennsylvania	33.9	75.6	41.7
35	Missouri	33	35	South Carolina	30.7	72.7	42
36	California	32.7	36	Rhode Island	34.3	76.3	42
37	New York	32.2	37	Indiana	33.8	76	42.2
38	Georgia	31.5	38	Ohio	33.5	75.9	42.4
39	Louisiana	31.3	39	Massachusetts	34.9	77.9	43
40	Maine	31.2	40	Mississippi	26.3	69.4	43.1
41	South Carolina	30.7	41	North Carolina	30.3	73.5	43.2
42	Florida	30.5	42	Alabama	27.1	70.5	43.4
43	North Carolina	30.3	43	Michigan	29.9	73.4	43.5
44	Michigan	29.9	44	Tennessee	29.9	74.1	44.2
45	Tennessee	29.9	45	Missouri	33	77.1	44.1
46	Arizona	28.2	46	Arkansas	28.2	72.7	44.5
47	Alabama	27.1	47	W. Virginia	25.3	70.6	45.3
48	Kentucky	26.9	48	Vermont	33.3	79.6	46.3
49	Mississippi	26.3	49	Kentucky	26.9	73.7	46.8
50	West Virginia	25.3	50	Maine	31.2	78.8	47.6

Table 2

From 2012 to 2013, the employment gap closed by one percentage point or more in 22 states. The top four states with the greatest reductions (AK, RI, WY, and NH) were small states-- with working-age populations under one million persons. It is hard to make comments about small states, because these statistics are estimates based on state-level samples. Smaller states have smaller samples and thus have a higher degree of year-to-year variability. I am hesitant to read too much into reductions and expansions in the employment gap for small states.

Looking at large states-- with working-age populations over 5 million persons--Illinois (a 2.3 percentage point reduction) and New Jersey (a 1 percentage point reduction) stand out. These are two large industrial states

All of the states that experienced reductions greater than one percentage point also experienced increases in employment rate of people with disabilities, so none of these reductions were due to a reduction in the employment rate of people without disabilities.

The state that really stands out is South Carolina, with a 2.3 point reduction, while also having a 1.3 point increase in the employment rate of people without disabilities. The big question is whether we can attribute success, like the success in South Carolina to changes in policy or new innovative approaches to employing people with disabilities.

Working-age population under 1 million
Working-age population over 5 million
Increase in no dis employment

State	2012			2013			Change in Gap		Pop in 2013			Increase in Dis. Emp.	Increase in Non-PWD Emp.
	Dis.	No Dis.	Gap	Dis.	No Dis.	Gap	Pct. Points	Rank	Number	Rank	Size		
AK	39.0	76.3	37.3	47.8	75.2	27.4	-9.9	50	459,776	47	Working-age pop. under 1 million	8.8	-1.1
RI	28.7	77.0	48.3	34.3	76.3	42.0	-6.3	49	668,448	43	Working-age pop. under 1 million	5.6	-0.7
WY	43.9	78.5	34.6	50.7	79.4	28.7	-5.9	48	358,526	50	Working-age pop. under 1 million	6.8	0.9

NH	37.9	80.5	42.6	41.8	80.3	38.5	-4.1	47	842,880	40	Working-age pop. under 1 million	3.9	-0.2
MN	42.1	81.6	39.6	46.0	82.1	36.1	-3.5	46	3,357,171	21		3.9	0.5
NV	35.5	72.2	36.7	39.2	73.1	33.9	-2.8	45	1,719,885	34		3.7	0.9
WI	37.6	79.5	41.9	40.9	80.1	39.2	-2.7	44	3,544,103	20		3.3	0.6
SC	27.0	71.4	44.4	30.7	72.7	41.9	-2.5	42	2,893,842	24		3.7	1.3
NM	33.1	70.4	37.3	35.3	70.1	34.8	-2.5	42	1,243,353	36		2.2	-0.3
IL	33.4	74.6	41.2	36.1	75.0	38.9	-2.3	41	8,010,771	5	Working-age pop. over 5 million	2.7	0.4
IA	42.0	81.4	39.5	44.8	82.1	37.2	-2.3	40	1,868,852	30		2.8	0.7
UT	41.1	77.2	36.1	42.5	76.6	34.1	-2.0	39	1,701,705	35		1.4	-0.6
DE	34.6	75.1	40.6	36.4	75.1	38.7	-1.9	38	565,138	45	Working-age population under 1 million	1.8	0
CO	40.3	77.1	36.8	42.3	77.3	35.0	-1.8	36	3,304,940	22		2.0	0.2
HI	37.3	75.6	38.3	39.1	75.7	36.5	-1.8	36	822,542	42	Working-age population under 1 million	1.8	0.1
NE	43.5	82.2	38.7	45.5	82.6	37.1	-1.6	35	1,125,425	38		2.0	0.4
ND	51.6	83.3	31.7	52.8	83.1	30.2	-1.5	34	451,304	48	Working-age population under 1 million	1.2	-0.2
KS	40.1	78.8	38.7	41.7	79.0	37.3	-1.4	33	1,730,369	33		1.6	0.2
MA	33.0	77.2	44.2	34.9	77.9	42.9	-1.3	31	4,272,843	14		1.9	0.7
OK	34.4	75.1	40.7	35.8	75.2	39.4	-1.3	31	2,295,734	28		1.4	0.1
TN	28.0	73.2	45.2	29.9	74.1	44.1	-1.1	30	3,983,560	16		1.9	0.9
NJ	35.0	74.5	39.5	36.6	75.1	38.5	-1.0	29	5,528,837	11	Working-age pop. over 5 million	1.6	0.6
TX	37.0	73.8	36.9	38.7	74.7	36.0	-0.9	28	#####	2	Working-age pop. over 5	1.7	0.9

FL	28.9	71.4	42.5	30.5	72.2	41.7	-0.8	27	#####	4	million Working -age pop. over 5 million	1.6	0.8
NY	30.9	72.7	41.8	32.2	73.3	41.1	-0.7	26	#####	3	Working -age pop. over 5 million	1.3	0.6
AL	26.8	70.8	44.0	27.1	70.5	43.4	-0.6	25	2,945,466	23		0.3	-0.3
GA	30.3	70.8	40.5	31.5	71.5	40.0	-0.5	22	6,151,890	8	Working -age pop. over 5 million	1.2	0.7
CT	39.7	76.6	36.9	40.0	76.4	36.4	-0.5	22	2,235,695	29		0.3	-0.2
WV	24.3	70.1	45.8	25.3	70.6	45.3	-0.5	22	1,132,703	37		1.0	0.5
WA	35.7	74.3	38.7	36.4	74.7	38.3	-0.4	21	4,339,199	13		0.7	0.4
PA	33.0	75.1	42.1	33.9	75.6	41.7	-0.4	20	7,849,516	6	Working -age pop. over 5 million	0.9	0.5
MT	38.7	76.4	37.7	39.4	76.8	37.4	-0.3	19	616,125	44	Working -age pop. under 1 million	0.7	0.4
MI	27.9	71.7	43.8	29.9	73.4	43.5	-0.3	18	6,096,761	9	Working -age pop. over 5 million	2.0	1.7
MS	26.4	69.6	43.3	26.3	69.4	43.1	-0.2	17	1,790,746	31		-0.1	-0.2
CA	31.8	70.2	38.5	32.7	71.1	38.4	-0.1	15	#####	1	Working -age pop. over 5 million	0.9	0.9
VA	36.3	76.5	40.1	36.9	76.9	40.0	-0.1	15	5,112,923	12	Working -age pop. over 5 million	0.6	0.4
KY	26.2	72.9	46.7	26.9	73.7	46.8	0.1	14	2,687,179	26		0.7	0.8
OH	32.8	75.1	42.2	33.5	75.9	42.4	0.2	13	7,072,114	7	Workin g-age pop.	0.7	0.8

											over 5 million		
MO	32.2	76.2	44.0	33.0	77.1	44.2	0.2	12	3,666,019	19		0.8	0.9
MD	39.5	77.4	37.9	40.0	78.3	38.2	0.3	11	3,722,201	18		0.5	0.9
IN	33.5	75.5	41.9	33.8	76.0	42.3	0.4	10	4,008,950	15		0.3	0.5
VT	34.3	79.8	45.5	33.3	79.6	46.3	0.8	9	397,726	49	Working-age pop under 1 million	-1.0	-0.2
AZ	34.2	71.0	36.8	33.6	71.3	37.7	0.9	8	3,900,900	17		-0.6	0.3
OR	34.3	72.1	37.8	35.2	73.9	38.8	1.0	7	2,440,752	27		0.9	1.8
NC	30.2	72.2	42.0	30.3	73.5	43.2	1.2	6	6,000,202	10	Working-age pop. over 5 million	0.1	1.3
ID	38.6	74.8	36.2	36.7	75.2	38.5	2.3	5	946,943	39	Working-age pop. under 1 million	-1.9	0.4
ME	33.2	78.1	44.8	31.2	78.8	47.6	2.8	4	825,507	41	Working-age pop. under 1 million	-2.0	0.7
LA	34.4	72.6	38.2	31.3	72.4	41.1	2.9	3	2,825,101	25		-3.1	-0.2
AR	31.4	72.7	41.3	28.2	72.7	44.5	3.2	2	1,759,900	32		-3.2	0
SD	52.0	81.8	29.8	48.1	83.0	34.9	5.1	1	501,769	46	Working-age pop. under 1 million	-3.9	1.2

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Viewpoint: Empower Michiganders with disabilities by Jennifer Mizrahi

[It's the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#). For the 684,000 working age people with disabilities in Michigan, architecture has improved, attitudes and opportunities have not. Sadly, only 29% of them are employed, compared to 73.4% of those without disabilities. This leads to poverty, powerlessness and worse. Additionally, there are 48,500 youth with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 20. This group of youth deserves the opportunity to succeed. However, [Michigan gave BACK more than \\$19 million dollars to the federal government](#) that could have been spent to enable Michiganders with disabilities to get jobs.

One-in-five Americans has a disability and most want to work, just like everyone else. Evidence shows that people with disabilities can be outstanding employees, leaders, and extremely loyal workers.

State vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs are just one way of ensuring that people with disabilities can achieve the American dream. These agencies operate by having the federal government match state contributions. It's a favorable deal as \$4 in federal money comes for every \$1 state dollar. However, if the states fail to spend the money or come up with matching funds, then the funds go back to Washington.

VR in Michigan helped 7,816 people with disabilities obtain jobs. However, many doors were closed when money was sent back. Failing to enable capable people with disabilities to get jobs and careers not only negatively impacts the lives of people with disabilities, but it also hurts employers who are missing out on real talent. It also wastes taxpayer money. When young people with disabilities get jobs, it can save big bucks that otherwise would be spent on government benefits.

Michigan is starting to benefit from strong leadership interested on these issues. [Governor Rick Snyder has hosted summits on the benefits of inclusive employment](#). He is reaching out to inspire business-to-business best practices. The Lieutenant Governor and Justice Bernstein have led "[Hidden Talent Tours](#)" and with chambers of commerce about hiring people with disabilities. Pilot programs are being developed for improving youth transition services.

Resources need to be directed to cost effective programs, and help people with disabilities pursue the American Dream. [Project SEARCH](#) and [Bridges to Work](#) continue to get outstanding results for employers, people with disabilities, and taxpayers around the country. Already there are some successful Project SEARCH sites in Michigan and they should be widely replicated across the state.

It is also vital to partner with employers who have business-driven talent needs. Ideal partners for this include the [US Business Leadership Network](#). Federal Contractors are also critical partners because of new regulations requiring that they be inclusive employers of people with disabilities.

[This new Section 503 rule creates a 7% hiring goal for all job categories.](#) Despite limited resources, Michigan Rehabilitation Services will be hosting orientations for companies such as General Dynamics, Kellogg, and Emergent Biosolutions regarding Section 503 and hiring talented people with disabilities. Key funding is needed to build on this success.

The new [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#) will provide states access to a pool of \$17 billion a year to help create opportunities for people with barriers to work. Every state must have a pre-approved plan in place by March 2016. That is why it is vital for Michigan to focus on best practices today.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi is the President of [RespectAbilityUSA.org](#), a non-profit organization working to enable people with disabilities to achieve the American dream. She can be reached at JenniferM@RespectAbilityUSA.org.