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Jan. 23, 2016

RespectAbility – Public Comments – Oregon Unified State Plan

Individuals with disabilities persistently face higher rates of unemployment than their non-disabled fellow citizens....while the state cannot guarantee a job to any Oregonian, the state can and should consistently work to continue to improve its provision of employment services to provide the best possible opportunities for success and choice for individuals receiving those services. This requires new approaches and partnerships with government, the non-profit services sector, and current and potential employers in business community.

- [Excerpt from Executive Order No. 15-01 Providing employment services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities](#)

Introduction

RespectAbility is pleased to submit the following comments regarding the current draft of the State of Oregon'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 Oregon's state plan.

Today Oregon has the opportunity to work hard to improve outcomes in terms of competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities. Currently, Oregon ranks 27th in the country in terms of their employment rate of people with disabilities. **Only 35.2% of the 274,900 working age Oregonians with disabilities are employed. Further, there are over 14,000 youth with disabilities and each year a quarter of them will age out of school into an uncertain future.**

Thanks to WIOA, Oregon has the chance to invest resources in successful models and implement best practices to expand job opportunities for people with disabilities. Oregon 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 Oregon can dramatically improve their outcomes with the right choices. **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. [Likewise, we have developed an extensive collection of data on disability and employment in Oregon.](#) That information is attached to our comments.

Our public comments on Oregon'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 Oregon push hard to see improved integrated employment outcomes for Oregonians with disabilities.

1. Use the best data points, including the Labor Force Participation Rates of people with disabilities v. those without disabilities, as performance metrics.

On page 16 of the current draft of Oregon’s Unified State Plan, there is an entire section dedicated to talking about “Workers with Disabilities.” This section identifies many critical barriers to employment such as “skill gaps, institutional barriers, and societal acceptance of individuals with disabilities.” Likewise, this section addresses how “individuals with disabilities face other forms of discrimination in hiring practices.” It concludes by including a chart showing “the employment rate for individuals with disabilities in the United States and in Oregon” between 2008 and 2013.

RespectAbility is pleased to see a discussion of the critical stigmas, misconceptions, and attitudinal barriers that keep far too many people with disabilities from being able to pursue the American Dream. **However, this section is completely useless without quantifying the actual number of people with disabilities living in Oregon. Precise numbers and clear statistics are needed if Oregon is to make any serious progress in terms of employment outcomes for people with disabilities.** To quantify the challenge of empowering more people with disabilities through the transformational power of employment, we recommend that this section of Oregon’s Unified State Plan be amended to include some of the most important data points related to disability employment.

As we stated in the opening paragraphs of our public comments, Oregon has the opportunity to significantly improve their outcomes in terms of jobs for people with disabilities. **As it stands now, Oregon ranks 27th in the nation with only 35.2% of 274,900 working age Oregon with disabilities are employed. Moreover, there is a 38.7 point gap between the labor force participation rate of Oregonians with disabilities (35.2%) and those without disabilities (73.9%). Further, there are 14,000 youth with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 20, one quarter of whom will age out of the school system every year.** The image below contains some of the much of data and detail needed in Oregon’s WIOA State Plan.

Figure 1.

Oregon Performance Metrics on Jobs for PWDs



Gov. Kate Brown (D)

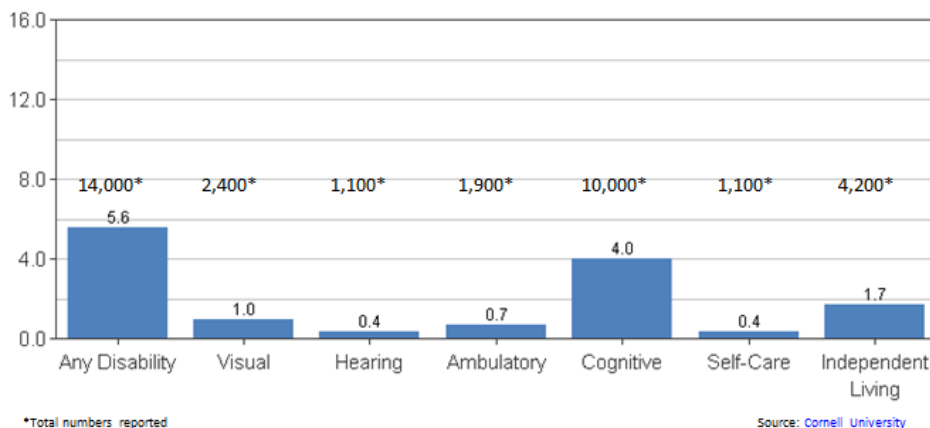
- ❖ 73.9% of persons without disabilities aged 18 to 64 are employed.³
- ❖ 35.2% of PwDs aged 18 to 64 are employed.³
- ❖ Oregon ranks 27th in the country in terms of jobs for PWDs.
- ❖ **There is a 38.7 point between the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of PWDs and those without disabilities. This is the most important performance metric to measure as this gap must be reduced.**
- ❖ 571,982 people with a disability live in OR.³
- ❖ 14,000 persons aged 16 to 20 have a disability.¹
- ❖ 274,900 persons aged 21 to 64 have a disability.¹
- ❖ 42,700 PwDs aged 18 to 64 receive benefits.¹
- ❖ Voc. Rehab. received 7,624 general applicants and 201 blind applicants in OR in 2012.³
- ❖ Voc. Rehab. obtained 2,133 jobs for PwDs in OR in 2012.³
- ❖ In 2012, OR’s total expenditure on SSDI benefits was \$1,562,076,000.³

1. 2012 Disability Status Report: Oregon, disabilitystatistics.org
2. StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes, 2013
3. [Annual Disability Statistics Compendium](#)

At a minimum, there are two critical data points that need to be added to the current draft of Oregon’s WIOA Plan. **First, it is critical that the Plan include data related to the number of Oregonians with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 20 as well as working age people with disabilities between 20 and 64 years of age.** This data is vital in order to clarify where skills training, early work experiences, and successful school to work transition programs can be applied to improve outcomes, especially for youth with disabilities. **Second, it is absolutely critical that Oregon’s workforce system include the labor force participation rates of people with disabilities both in their performance metrics and on their state dashboards.** If performance metrics are limited to things like unemployment statistics, then people who are not actively looking for work are being excluded from the plan’s analysis of the state economy. It is clear from several other section of the Unified State Plan that labor force participation rate data is available for analysis. It is a critical lens that is needed to bring clarity to the issue of employment for people with disabilities. If that data is not available through the Oregon Employment Department, [then here is a link to the presentation our organization has compiled with the types of data needed to inform decision making around job opportunities for Oregonians with disabilities.](#) This collection, which is also attached to our public comments, contains data derived from the Census Bureau.

Additionally, it is vital to monitor the employment rates of young people with disabilities by type of disability. For example, because of dramatic breakthroughs in assistive technology, the employment rates for people who are hearing or sight impaired, should dramatically improve as Oregon moves forward. To illustrate this point, we have attached the figure below which provides a breakdown of the type of disabilities among Oregon’s approximately 14,000 youth with disabilities.

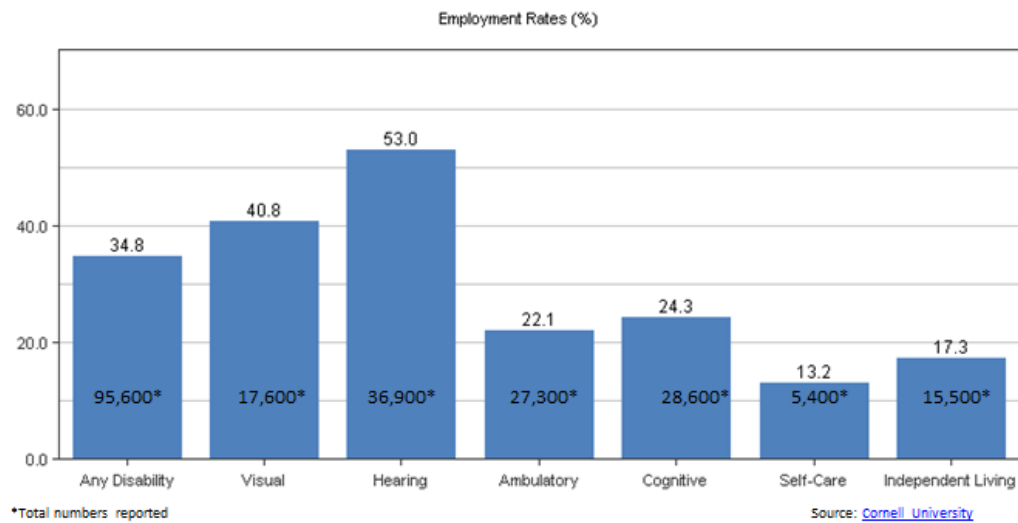
Figure 2.
Prevalence of Disability Among Non-Institutionalized
People Ages 16 to 20 in Oregon in 2012
 Prevalence Rates: Age 16 to 20 years (%)



This level of detail and data is critical if Oregon’s workforce system is to be fully prepared to overcome the barriers that keep far too many job seekers with disabilities out of the workforce. For example, thanks to assistive technology, the 2,400 young Oregonians with visual differences can enter the workforce in greater numbers than ever before. Likewise, for the 1,100 young people with hearing disabilities, technological solutions such as speech to text software can easily integrate them into a work setting with their non-disabled peers.

While Oregon currently ranks 27th in the nation in terms of the employment rate for people with disabilities, it is still critical to look at the experience of those with disabilities who are succeeding in the world of work. The figure below provides an illustration of the current employment rates of working age Oregonians with disabilities by disability type. From the data, we see that 40% of the 17,600 Oregonians who are blind or have vision loss are employed while 53% of people with hearing differences are also employed. Given the flexibility and availability of assistive technology solutions, the employment rate for this subgroup should be much higher. People who are blind or deaf have incredible talents that can be unleashed by something as simple as a smartphone. Sadly, we also see that only 24.3% of Oregonians with intellectual or developmental disabilities are employed. For this demographic, workforce solutions may take more time and resources. However, there will be a considerable return on investment if Oregon’s workforce system invests in and expands successful school to work transition programs. For example, serving this population, Project Search sites have been achieving a 70% employment outcome for people with these types of differences.

Figure 3. Employment of Non-Institutionalized Working-Age People (Ages 21 to 64) by Disability Status in Oregon in 2012



To further underscore the intersectionality of inequality, poverty, and disability, we would also like to add the following chart. This graphic from our state data presentation about Oregon shows the strong correlations between unemployment, disability status, poverty, smoking, and obesity. We hope that such data will better inform the decision making process.

**Figure 4.
Oregon Data on Poverty, Smoking, Obesity, and Employment**

		People with Disabilities (%)		People without Disabilities (%)	
		2012	2013	2012	2013
Poverty ¹	US	29.2	28.7	13.6	13.6
	OR	31.8	30.7	15.6	14.8
Smoking ¹	US	26.0	25.4	16.9	16.2
	OR	27.2	25.6	14.3	14.8
Obesity ¹	US	39.1	40.1	24.5	25.0
	OR	37.8	36.9	23.6	22.9
Employment ¹	US	32.7	33.9	73.6	74.2
	OR	34.3	35.2	72.1	73.9

¹Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, Pg 53, 54, 72, 73, 29

Precision is needed when using statistics to advance policy proposals. We hope that these important details will be revised as Oregon’s WIOA State Plan moves forward. For example, there are several other points where the labor force participation rates of people with disabilities can be added to the current raft of Oregon’s Unified State Plan. For example, on page 24, the Plan talks about “The Performance Reporting Information System (PRISM)” used throughout Oregon’s workforce system. Does this system include specific information relating to working age people with disabilities and youth with disabilities in Oregon? Can this system be used to share the LFPR of people with disabilities with partner organizations and state agencies? Does platform also include information on the range of disabilities that people have? This system needs to include detail metrics on disability and employment. Additionally, on page 74, the Plan discusses the “Assessment of Participants’ Post-Program Success” and indicates that research is being done on the “use of additional indicators to monitor service delivery in real-time, improve outcomes, and respond to immediate needs of our local communities.” We would submit, once again, that this is point what data on people with disabilities in workforce is needed. For example, the labor force participation rates of people with disabilities should be included as such “an additional indicator” as should the employment gap between people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. These are several points where greater detail is clearly needed.

The efforts of Oregon’s VR system and their collaborations with other components of the workforce system need to be data-driven and focused on best practices. In terms of data, [there are multiple sources](#), from [universities](#) to [research foundations](#) to [the federal government](#) that provide in-depth data that is freely available and can be very useful. Further, our organization has developed extensive data about disability, employment, workforce participation, and resources that can be used to empower more Oregonians with disabilities. We hope that data of this kind is added immediately to the draft of Oregon’s Unified State Plan.

2. Busting the stigma, myths, and misconceptions should be part of Oregon’s overall 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 Unified State Plan be amended to include a communications/public relations strategy for reducing such stigmas.

[A great example of the business case for disability inclusion is provided by Walgreens who has demonstrated that workers with disabilities in their distribution centers are as productive, safer, and turn over less when compared to peers without disabilities](#). Several sections of the Plan talk about outreach to business with a focus on educating employers about how the workforce system can train job seekers to meet their labor needs. The unique talents and tremendous skills of employees with disabilities need to be a key part of that conversation.

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 Oregon 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 Oregon VR staff as well as community agencies in supporting Oregon companies through messaging efforts around related to fear and stigma.**

3. Focus on Effective and Strategic Employer Engagements, Especially with Federal Contractors around Section 503

More emphasis is needed in Oregon’s Unified State Plan around the employment opportunities and talent challenges created by the Section 503 regulations and federal contractors. [Oregon’s Plan as written contains only minimal references to the new 7% utilization goal set for companies to recruit, hire, and retain qualified individuals with disabilities in all job categories](#). Given the priority placed on Sector Strategies by the Unified State Plan and the vast number of employers doing business with the Federal government, this is a huge opportunity to outcomes for people with disabilities.

Oregon needs to respond to the opportunity created by Section 503 with a strategy focused on competitive advantage, not just compliance. For example, the only explicit reference to Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act in Oregon’s WIOA Plan is on page 43 where a passing reference is made to how “VR also works with federal contractors to help meet their 503 requirements and targets.” Greater depth and detail is needed here and elsewhere in the Plan. **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.

4. Ensure the Accessibility of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Programs and Careers for People with Disabilities, especially Students with IEPs.

The current draft of Oregon’s Unified State Plan clearly identifies many of the skills and opportunities that are needed as the economy of the future evolves. For example, the Plan talks about how “The knowledge and technology base for the vast majority of professional and technical occupations is changing rapidly” and that “innovations and others are generating the

need for occupations such as cybersecurity specialists, business intelligence analysts, and mechatronics engineers.” Further, the Plan references “The 2015 Oregon Talent Plan” which identified “ten top occupational clusters in three categories” that include “advance manufacturing, energy, healthcare and biosciences industry sectors.” Such examples reflect the forward thinking and future planning that WIOA was intended to spur.

Given the evolving opportunities and openings in Oregon’s economy, it is critical that Oregonians with disabilities not be excluded from being able to pursue careers in these fields. As Carol Glazer said, writing earlier this year 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.](#)” People with disabilities should be part of the solution.

Federal contractors and other employers have huge demands for STEM qualified talents. However, many schools place their best supports for students with disabilities in schools that do not have strong STEM training. This is a huge loss as people on the Autism Spectrum, for example, 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.](#)” These experiences and partnerships offer insights into how to challenge employer perceptions, recruit diverse talent, and ultimately put people to work. Delaware’s Governor Jack Markell has led the way in partnering with companies to employ more people on the autism spectrum. Such examples need to be implemented by Oregon. **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 work to ensure people with disabilities have the chance to become future scientists, engineers, and mathematicians.**

Partnerships should be created with federal contractors who have 503 requirements and talent shortages. **Oregon is lucky to be home to such diverse Federal Contractors as URS Corp, Vigor Industrial LLC, Flir Systems Inc., Kalama Export Company LLC, and Marubeni Corp.** Through WIOA, Oregon’s workforce system has a chance to collaborate with these dynamic businesses to help them meet and exceed their Section 503 requirements.

The Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation has a critical role to play in acting as that catalyst in the future. **At a minimum, the VR sections of the Unified State Plan should be amended to ensure that Title IV Program staff members are fully trained in all 503 regulations.** In order to ensure that such knowledge does not get trapped in a silo, VR staff should be prepared to act as consultants to help businesses meet the 503 regulations while simultaneously building disability inclusion projects that are integrated into companies’ overall diversity strategies.

5. Examine the Gap in Performance Metrics between Oregon and other states like Alaska, the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Iowa.

Other states facing a variety of challenges have higher than 50% employment rates for their citizens with disabilities. [States like the Dakotas, Alaska, and Wyoming have achieved incredible results by putting best practices into places.](#) Fully 52% of North Dakotans with disabilities are employed, as are 50% of Wyomingites with disabilities and 48% of South Dakotans with disabilities. These states show that Oregon can dramatically improve their outcomes with the right choices. **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 at employing people with disabilities.

6. Focus on Sector Strategies to Get More PWDs Employed

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.

Graph 2 on page 10 of the current draft of the WIOA State Plan provides a clear view of the economies opportunities that growing in Oregon’s near term future. The “Expected Job Changes by Industry Sector over the Year” reflect a strong sense of economic optimism. Namely, the plan says that “Net job gains are expected across all major private industries.”

Ensuring that such economic growth doesn’t leave people with disabilities behind requires the focused attention and dedicated effort of Oregon’s workforce system. Specifically the State Plan says that “Professional and business services is expected to continue adding a lot of jobs (+16,800), followed by leisure and hospitality (+7,300), retail trade (+5,900), health care (+4,400), and construction (+4,300).”

We submit that most of these are job sectors where people with disabilities can excel and benefit their employer’s bottom line. As example of how Oregon can do this, we would recommend that Oregon look at disability employment programs that have helped hotels and resorts meet their talent needs in other states. **The draft of Oregon’s WIOA state plan indicates that “leisure and hospitality” is a key industry sector propelling the state’s economic growth. Employers working in this sector can greatly benefit from the loyalty, dedication, and retention rates of employees with disabilities.**

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 have 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 the overall Sector Strategies for Oregon.**

Likewise, in other states, [hotels and other hospitality employers have found Project SEARCH to be an amazing source of talent](#). Each year approximately 2,700 young people, spread out in 45 states, do a one-year, school-to-work Project Search 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. The goal for each program participant is competitive employment.

[The work done by Embassy Suites and David Scott in Omaha, Nebraska offers valuable lessons that can enable Oregon to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities](#). The Oregon 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.

The untapped potential of Oregon's 274,900 working age people with disabilities is such that a full-spectrum approach is needed. **Oregon should also be looking to expanding disability employment programs in the supply chain and distribution sector.** We recommend this given the incredible work we have seen by employer who are making employees with disabilities part of their efforts to become more efficient, productive, and competitive.

[A great example of the business case for disability inclusion is provided by Walgreens who 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](#) (just to name a few) 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."](#) 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. **Supply chain continues to be a sector that embraces disability inclusion, and the knowledge of the benefits to companies of inclusion are spreading to other industries.**

7. Improve School to Work Transitions for Youth with Disabilities – Including on disability employment programs in Hotels, Hospitals, and Elder Care Facilities

There is a significant need for the State of Oregon to expand Project Search to train, prepare, and transition more young people with disabilities into the workforce. Already, there are several successful Project Search sites that provide valuable examples of the skills and abilities young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities possess. [Several hospitals in the state of Oregon have already benefitted from the pipeline of talent created by Project SEARCH's business model.](#) Youth who have gone through this innovative model have proven themselves to be incredible assets in settings such as the Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) and Portland Providence Portland Medical Center. **Remarkable work of this kind depends on collaboration and partnerships, both key tenants of the paradigm shift of WIOA.**

Project Search sites 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."](#)** These are the types of successful outcomes that Oregon should be working hard to achieve.

8. Avoid the Opportunity Costs of Focusing on Bricks and Mortar One-Stop Centers / American Job Centers. Many Should be Mobile and All Services Online

There is a significant note of caution that we will like to add in terms of both the current draft of the Unified State Plan as well as the future of Oregon's Workforce System. The State Plan should look to innovate beyond simply co-locating services and supports at the One-Stop Centers in Oregon. **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.** 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.

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.](#)

We are pleased to see the level of detail that is included in the section of the State Plan that addresses “the Accessibility of the One-Stop Delivery System.” From the language on page 76, it is clear that Oregon’s system is putting on a priority on programmatic as well as physical accessibility. Site visits, Coordinators, and checklists are all useful tools. We would only hasten to add that expanding online resources and digital access can have broad benefits across Oregon’s workforce system.

9. Overcome the gap between disability services and career services in Secondary Education.

There is a looming issue that needs to be addressed before we can fully details the points and priorities needed in order to open more career pathways to Oregonians with disabilities. In fact, the State Plan expresses a great deal of pride in terms of the career pathways offered in Oregon. Specifically on page 35 of the Unified State Plan, it says that “Oregon has long been a leader in career pathways. We have a strong collation of community colleges and training providers that promote and provide career pathways.”

The issue we have in mind is the 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.

[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. **Oregon must 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.**

Returning to the text of the Unified State Plan, page 51 includes specific information about the extensive collaboration between the “Oregon Workforce Investment Board (OWIB) and Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC).” While the statistics cited above are national ones, they have significant bearing on the partnership between OWIB and HECC. Students with disabilities who go into post-secondary education need to be equipped with the skills to succeed in the world of work, regardless of whatever difference they have. The disconnect between disability and career services has to be solved. The solution depends on collaboration between OWIB and HECC. Further, this can also play into the work that needs to be done around Section 503. As Oregon’s workforce system evolves to train and educate succeeding generations of talented employees, they need to ensure that college graduates with disabilities succeed. As the Beaver State looks to triangulate between employer needs, skills training, and recruiting workers; it will do well to remember the importance of getting students with disabilities connected to career services and prepared for the workplace.

10. Ensure that Apprenticeship Programs in Oregon are Fully Accessible and Actively Recruiting Young People with Disabilities

Starting on page 31, the current draft of Oregon’s WIOA State Plan goes into great detail concerning “State Strategies to achieve its Vision and Goals.” One of those goals that we think is important to discuss is the opportunities available through apprenticeships. Specifically in Strategies 3.4 and 4.3, the Plan discusses how to “Rethink and restructure training and skill development to include innovative and effective work-based learning” as well as “Provide technical assistance...to support adoption and expansion of work-based learning, apprenticeships, and internships.” Further, on page 55 of the Plan, there is a clear awareness of the need to attract underrepresented demographic groups into the dynamic opportunities offered by apprenticeships and other work-based training programs. The language here says that “OED and the Apprenticeship Training Division will continue to work towards increasing the number of women and minorities involved in structured work based learning and registered apprenticeship programs.”

We strongly emphasize to the Oregon Workforce Investment Board to consider the vital opportunity that apprenticeship training and credentialing can offer to young people with disabilities in Oregon. At a minimum, people with disabilities should be identified as a group to be reached with information and resources about work based training. Further, we direct OWIB and OED to the work being done by the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the federal level. ODEP 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 the Oregon Workforce Investment Board to invest time and energy to understand the best practices contained in ODEP’s apprenticeship toolkit.](#)**

11. VR Innovations - Prioritize pre-employment training expand partnerships with VR

As much as we would encourage Oregon to follow Wisconsin’s example by working hard to expand the number of Project SEARCH sites, this is not the only paradigm that the Beaver State should follow. **The school system, vocational rehabilitation, and local workforce boards should be encouraged to build creative, collaborative partnerships with companies that are leading in the disability space such as Amazon, UPS, and Pepsi.**

A great example of the type of effort that Oregon can follow comes from UPS in Louisville, Kentucky. At one of the global logistics company’s busiest facilities in a training program dedicated to preparing youth with disabilities to succeed. [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.**

To begin with, we would highly recommend that the Oregon Workforce Investment Board examine how to support disability employment efforts through establishment of public/private partnerships in local communities. For example, such partnerships could be a tremendous asset to the work of the local WIBs that will be doing so much under the regional planning focus of Oregon’s Unified State Plan. **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 to employ individuals with disabilities”, “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.”](#)

Further, the experiences of Georgia’s vocational rehabilitation agency could inform that efforts of VR in Oregon. Prompted by WIOA, GVRA is designing a new service delivery model to serve young people with disabilities both in and out of school. The model, which is being developed in partnership with Georgia’s Department of Education and Workforce Development division, will be piloted in five school districts in 2016, and then offered to every school in the state. **The model will build on the state’s existing Career Pathways curriculum, directing students with disabilities into high-demand career pathways and comprehensive work-based learning experiences with employer partners in each school district.** Beyond this effort, GVRA sees WIOA as an opportunity to re-structure the agency to serve many more Georgians with disabilities and to increase its placement and retention rates. Poses Family Foundations has been working to meet GVRA’s training needs and could easily provide similar support in Oregon.

12. Effective employer engagement depends on having the right partnerships, using the right language, and focusing on the right business audience.

Our hope to see improving employment outcomes in Oregon very much depends on being an employer driven paradigm shift. Yes, there are new rules and regulations, but this law is fundamentally about spurring innovation and expanding opportunity. **There will be no outcomes in terms employment for Oregonians with disabilities without early, often, systematic, and aggressive business engagement.**

It is clear that the current draft of the State Plan takes the issue of employer engagement very seriously. For example, starting on page 45, it goes into great detail around how to coordinate and align the “activities and resources in WorkSource centers”, “involve multiple stakeholders”, by providing “comprehensive, high-quality services to employers.” The Plan then goes on to list the multiple points of impact across the workforce system for carrying this work forward. Another reflection of this commitment is the discussion of how to create “feedback loops aimed at aligning and improving services” to employers on page 46.

There are several points to be made about how to make these efforts as maximally effective as possible, especially in terms of enabling employers to benefit from the incredible talents of people with disabilities. Successful employer engagement depends on collaborating with the right partners, speaking the right language, and targeting the right audience.

First and foremost, there is a critical need to involve the affiliate chapter of the United State Business Leadership Network. [Based in the Portland metro area, USBLN's Oregon affiliate is "a local educational organization" focused on helping "employers learn how to leverage their organizations for success" in terms of recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities.](#) **The Portland BLN represents the very stakeholders discussed in the Unified State Plan and it needs to be part of this employer engagement process.**

Second, we emphasize the business case for hiring people with disabilities again and again for a simple reason. **Government action alone--even through vocation rehabilitation -- is insufficient to improve employment outcomes for Oregonians with disabilities.** The necessary condition for achieving greater competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities is engaging employers and meeting their talent needs.

Our perspective as an organization is that engaging employers is very much a communication challenge that can be overcome being reaching the right audience with the right message. In the case of disability employment, there are actually two audiences that have to be reached. **The first half is the CEOs or leaders with policy making authority. The second are the hiring managers and on-the-ground supervisors.** The right message for CEOs or other leaders of a company in the business case for their specific company around how to overcome stigma, alleviate fears, and integrated disability into the talent pipeline.

To reach the leaders in an employer, they need support with understanding the business case for their specific company plus dealing with their fear/stigma at the top level. Hiring managers and supervisors are the key implementers who will turn high minded policy into action at the ground level. 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.

13. Adopt a "Jackie Robinson" Strategy to Improve Outcomes for Youth with Barriers to Employment

While we hope the WIOA will improve employment opportunities and training for all youth, it is especially critical for youth with disabilities that Oregon abandon the failed policies of the past. **In particular, we hope Oregon's workforce system will seriously consider that attitudinal barriers, stigma, myths, and misconceptions about people with disabilities are a critical obstacle in the push for improved employment outcomes.** [Our perspective as an organization is that the barriers created by stigma will be broken by using what we call a "Jackie Robinson Strategy."](#) 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. **The Jackie Robinson strategy suggests that strategic triage is needed.** While it is important to have multiple pathways to success for people with disabilities who have been long-term unemployed or in sheltered workshops, we must need to achieve early wins for employers. Indeed, the greatest focus and largest efforts need to be where there will be a serious return on investment for employers so that they will want to continue to expand the practice of inclusive employment. **Helping young people with disabilities to successfully transition into the right jobs for them in the workforce will create a path for those who may have a**

greater need for employment supports to also succeed. Put differently, by enabling trailblazers with less significant disabilities to succeed first with new business partnerships/employers, it can open doors for people with the most significant disabilities to follow them into those places of employment. Oregon can do this by focusing WIOA resources on what works best – [early interventions](#), paid internships, [academic internships](#), [connecting youth with apprenticeships](#), [job coaching](#), and other best practices.

As we stated at the beginning of our public comments, there are over 115,000 youth with disabilities and each year a quarter of them will age out of school into an uncertain future. This figure includes people with a wide range of different disabilities. For the sake of strategic planning in the workforce system, it is important to look closely at the different subpopulations with the disability community because one size does not fit all when it comes to employment opportunities. It is also worth noting that the solutions to these barriers to employment are rapidly evolving. **For example, ten years ago, it would have been very difficult for people with visual or hearing disabilities to be fully integrated in the workplace.** Now, thanks to assistive technology such as speech to text software or screen reader software can easily accommodate visual or hearing differences. For the 2,400 young Oregonians who are blind or have limited vision, training to use JAWs or other screen reader software can give them the skills to enter the workplace. Likewise, for 1,100 young people with hearing disabilities between the ages of 16 and 20, speech to text software or smart phones can help them communicate with their nondisabled peers. These are simple solutions that can overcome significant barriers. As such, they are issues that are very focus under the prevue of Oregon’s workforce system. We raise these to showcase ways to employment barriers in a cost-effective and replicable manner.

When dealing with the cyclical patterns of economic growth, issues of adequate resources will always remain an issue. **To support innovation and expand opportunity, Oregon’s VR system should look at connecting [with private-sector and philanthropic resources to complement public-sector funding with short-term pilots, innovative ideas, or evaluations and studies](#).** Successful models in Delaware, [Nevada](#), and [other states show how improved employment outcomes can be achieved through collaboration and cooperation](#) with philanthropy.

The Poses Family Foundation’s philanthropic efforts in workforce development and disability employment has been incredible at creating system in such diverse states as Ohio, Missouri, and Georgia. The change they have helped to develop and sustain is doing remarkable, creative work. The models followed in these states offer significant hope for Oregon to dramatically improve their outcomes.

14. People with disabilities are can be ideal talent as Oregon’s population ages and Baby Boomers leave gaps in the workforce.

Early in the current draft of Oregon’s WIOA State Plan, detail and attention is given to the impact that aging Baby Boomers are having on the “age structure of Oregon’s workforce.” As stated above, many of the sectors projected to undergo significant growth are the kinds of job sectors where people with disabilities, with appropriate training and early work experiences, can succeed. **As demand for health care grows and more aging Americans exit the workforce, RespectAbility submits that people with disabilities are a natural labor resource that should be tapped to meet these economic trends.**

To quote a 2014 report from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), [“\[people with disabilities\] not only represent an untapped talent pool, but \[they\] also offer significant](#)

[value and insight” in the field of healthcare](#). There are numerous examples of young people with disabilities doing incredible work [in the fields of healthcare, elderly care, and in assisted living](#). [Already, Project Search has been creating pathways into competitive, integrated employment in the healthcare sector for youth with disabilities at Oregon Health & Science University \(OHSU\) and Providence Portland Medical Center](#). However, there is great growth potential for such work sites in nursing homes, senior living facilities and at hotels.

Likewise, the current draft of Oregon’s Unified State Plan goes into great detail concerning the critical difference between “replacement openings” and “growth openings” on pages 12 and 13. Graph 3 in that section does a good job of visually stating that gap between “Growth Openings vs. Replacement Openings” in the immediate future. In looking for ways to address those “Replacement Openings”, we recommend that the state’s workforce system look for ways to train and prepare the seven out of ten Oregonians with disabilities to plug those gaps. People with disabilities represent an untapped talent pool and one that needs to be tapped for the sake of growing the economy. As such, we recommend that the Plan be amended to consider what role Oregonians with disabilities can play in the future workforce.

15. Finding market niches with high turnover jobs.

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 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 accommodations were far outweighed by the low turnover rates and better tenures of the employees with disabilities.** Hospitals, elder care institutions, hotels, and distribution/supply chains including [UPS, Wal-Mart, and Walgreens have proven records of success](#). **They can be outstanding partners for disability employment as these industries suffer from high turnover rates and employees with disabilities 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.

16. Local Planning efforts need to include planning for disability employment efforts.

A key facet of Oregon’s approach to implementing Sector Strategies is to delegate much of the work to local boards. Those boards in turn, as outlined in the Plan on page 34, will focus their efforts to other job sectors specific to their local regions. This emphasis on local organization and planning throughout the draft WIOA Unified State Plan creates unique challenges in the drive for improved employment outcomes for Oregonians with disabilities. **While regional differences needed to be accounted for, guiding this entire process needs to be a unifying vision and clear sense of what works.** The diversity of regions and economic opportunities in Oregon create many challenges, but the solutions to those challenges can have common features. For example, [RespectAbility collaborated with a range of other organizations to develop 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 at employing people with disabilities. These practices can be adapted and applied to meet the unique challenges created by the emphasis on regional organization in Oregon’s Draft State Plan.

Particularly in the eastern segments of Oregon, agriculture should be a huge employment pathway that should be fully accessible to people with disabilities. [There is a significant opportunity through WIOA to build on and expand on TIAA-CREF's Fruits of Employment project. This program provides internships and job training to workers with disabilities to prep them for careers in competitive agriculture.](#) Further, the State Board and the State Plan should also look at the opportunities being created in other states by [the AgrAbility Program of the USDA](#). Further, [there is already some work being done in this sector through the Youth Transition Program in Oregon and it should be referenced in the State Plan.](#)

17. Seeing is believing when it comes to jobs for people with disabilities.

On page 36 of the current draft of Oregon's Unified State Plan, there is a discussion of how the "Executive leadership from VR, HECC, OED, and Self Sufficiency Programs (SSP)" will be collaborating with local boards to sponsor "a series of Local Area Alignment Meetings". We are hopeful that such meetings will be a great opportunity to collaborate, share, and break down barriers. We suggest that this Executive team, in their work with regional partners, have an opportunity for leadership. As a specific, easy, first step, they have a chance to focus on one of the important best practices that encourage innovative thinking and engagement around jobs for people with disabilities. That step is to conduct site visits to successful disability employment programs and model systems. Touring a model employer who is capitalizing on the talents of employees with disabilities can be an eye opening experience. As such, it should be a priority to help regional partners to serve job seekers with disabilities.

18. 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 a place where that is not possible, Oregon should look at partnering with UBER and other new transportation solutions. Indeed, for people with disabilities who do drive, such companies as UBER can also provide a way to enter into the workforce with flexible hours.](#)

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

[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 or unaddressed through childhood and into the school years. **Given these statistics from the BJS, it is vital that Oregon identify how many of the individuals in the ex-offender pipeline have disabilities.**

Such an effort could easily be integrated into the current draft of Oregon's WIOA State Plan. For example, page 97 of the Plan reiterates Oregon's commitment "to support corrections education programs under section 225 of WIOA in accordance with Title II" and goes on to add that "Academic programing within Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) facilities will include adult education and literacy activities, English language acquisition activities, peer tutoring and special education where feasible." We would recommend that screening for disabilities be part of the assessment tools used to support corrections education

programs. Screening for previously undisclosed, invisible, or mental health differences will become an ever more critical as the national- impetus grows around the release and rehabilitation of more and more non-violent offenders.

Serving ex-offender is a critical workforce development challenge and one that can only increase when disability is a factor as well. The price paid for ignoring this issue are higher rates of recidivism and greater costs to society. Can there be screening or assessment tools for identify disability as people either enter or exit the prison system? If people who have been in the corrections system are to be well served by Oregon’s workforce system, then it is vital that disability issues be identified and addressed in a way that will help them develop their talents so they can be successful citizens and workers in the future.

20. 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 on such critical decision making bodies as the Oregon Talent Council (OTC). This is a critical gap that should be closed. Likewise, the State Plan could also direct local workforce boards to connect with local community organizations to recruit self-advocates to add their perspectives.

21. Educating the Entire Workforce System, Employers, Customers and the Public about Free, Accessible Services and Resources on Best Practices:

Oregon offers many online and in person resources to help employers and people with disabilities come together to build success. But 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. There is also no need to re-invent the wheel in creating online resources as ASKJAN.org, the US Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, [our organization and others also offer free toolkits, webinars and training opportunities](#). Another resource is 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.

22. State Level Affirmative Action –hiring of people with disabilities for jobs in state government and state contracting obligations:

As stated above, the continuing challenge of improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities requires a full spectrum approach. One of the best practices identified first in Governor Markell’s *Better Bottom Line* Initiative and later in RespectAbility’s *Disability Employment First Planning* Toolkit concerns hiring people with disabilities at the state level. Specifically, state government hiring and contracting can also be a source of opportunity for people with disabilities. In Governor Markell’s own words, [“One key action is to set a state goal for hiring people with disabilities through an executive order and hold agencies accountable for achieving that goal.”](#) **This is an action that Oregon should take in so far as “Local government employment is recovering as budgets have recovered” as discussed on Page 9 of the State Plan.**

Beyond Delaware, other states have also followed this recommendation. For example, [Governor Inslee in Washington State](#) and [Governor Dayton in Minnesota](#) have been working to implement this idea through executive orders. [Likewise, we are also seeing great success with governmental hiring of people with disabilities at the local level in Montgomery County Maryland.](#) While many states may have hiring freezes in place, those states where government itself has growing talent needs, people with disabilities can be a successful solution.

Next is the matter of contracting in state government. As with Section 503, state government can also use contracting as a means to promote the hiring, retention and promotion of people with disabilities. Contracts with state may not be as vast or lucrative as federal contracting, but this is yet another place where innovative work can be done to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities at the state level. Lastly, as shown by Delaware and Montgomery County, having a fast track or selective placement hiring system for people with disabilities can create more jobs.

Oregon, Jobs, People with Disabilities, and Lane v. Brown:

[Lane v. Brown, initially filed in January 2012](#), is a class action lawsuit of eight Oregon-based plaintiffs with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), [claiming violations of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) and *Olmstead v. L.C.*, due to segregation in sheltered workshops or being at risk of segregation](#). This lawsuit involved community service providers and those “similarly situated” with I/DD in, or referred to, Oregon’s sheltered workshops; [such workshops paid subminimum wages \(less than \\$1.00/hour versus the much-higher \\$8.80 minimum wage\), in exchange for menial tasks \(stuffing envelopes\), offering neither career advancement nor substantive training](#). Essentially, defendants did not provide (and limited access to) integrated services [despite Oregonians with I/DD being open to, and easily able to benefit from, such offerings](#). Integrated workshops offer a reasonable salary and opportunities based on one’s abilities. This class action was amended in June 2012 to include “all individuals in Oregon with...disabilities” relating to sheltered workshops. [In March 2013, the U.S. Department of Justice moved to intervene, resulting in a proposed Settlement Agreement on September 8, 2015](#). The Settlement Agreement, subject to magistrate judicial approval, affects 7,000 Oregon-based people with I/DD who are able to, and wish to work in, everyday work settings; the Agreement builds upon Oregon’s Integrated Employment Plan and the Executive Order 15-01 issued earlier in February 2015.

What it means for Oregon going forward

Lane v. Brown is a ground-breaking case. It is the first class action lawsuit to challenge subminimum wages of those with I/DD, and in doing so, establishes a precedent for I/DD advocacy. Oregon, by June 2017, plans to decrease time in sheltered workshops by nearly 30%, and by June 2022, will ensure that 1,115 people with I/DD at sheltered workshops will transition to non-sheltered environments. This case has important implications for Oregon moving forward and yet it is not mentioned at all in the current draft of the Unified State Plan. We raise this issue because this case gives Oregon the opportunity to prioritize competitive, integrated employment moving forward and to invest heavily in improving school to work transitions for youth intellectual and developmental disabilities. Because *Lane v. Brown* is a precedent setting case, the eyes of many across the county are now on Oregon. Oregon’s leaders and the workforce system have a vital responsibility to ensure that the process ends with the largest number of employment outcomes in the community that are possible. People with disabilities, especially

those with intellectual and developmental differences, have incredible talents that if matched to the right employer can empower them to become incredible employees. *Lane v. Brown* gives Oregon to take a hard look at the failed policies of the past and to invest in a better future for all Oregonians.

Conclusion

As we stated at the beginning of our Public Comments, Oregon has the opportunity to do much better on jobs for people with disabilities. From the language of the Unified State Plan, there is a lot of innovative and dedicated work being done on workforce development in Oregon. However, it is critical that these systems, supports, and services collaborate in order to train and prepare job seekers with disabilities to be the talent that employers need and become increasing successful members of society. To be a fully accessible society, career pathways need ramps just as architecture does. The reason why this is imperative is simple. Oregonians with disabilities want to pursue the American Dream, just like everyone else.

Thanks to WIOA, Oregon has an opportunity to invest resources in successful models and implement best practices to expand job opportunities for people with disabilities. We remain concerned with the lack of detail and coordination we have found in certain sections of Oregon's state plan. However, there is some good as well. Our public comments are focus on several critical factors that can help Oregon to significantly improve outcomes and we hope see them implemented soon.

The bottom line is that expanding job opportunities for people with disabilities is 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.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, President and CEO, RespectAbility
Philip Pauli, Policy and Practices Director, RespectAbility