

Workforce Integration Task Force

Final Report to Governor John R. Kasich



TABLE OF CONTENTS

A MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIRS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
Background	4
INTRODUCTION	7
Key Task Force Findings on Barriers to Employment.....	9
Specific Barriers	9
Recommendations.....	13
Recommendation #1: OOD and ODJFS Collaboration on Uniform and Effective Communication	13
Recommendation #2: Business to Business Engagement.....	14
Recommendation #3: Building a Culture of Diversity & Inclusion	15
Recommendation #4: Explore Ways to Connect Employers with Individuals with Disabilities	16
Recommendation #5: Developing Standards for Services	17
Recommendation # 6: Working Group on Program Alignment.....	18
Recommendation #7: Disincentives to Work.....	19
Recommendation #8: Access to Pre-vocational and Vocational Training.....	19
Recommendation #9: Immersive and Hands on Training	20
Recommendation #10: Transportation.....	21
CONCLUSION	22
APPENDIX A: WORKFORCE INTEGRATION TASK FORCE MEMBERS.....	24
APPENDIX B: SURVEY DATA FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY.....	26
Questionnaires	26
Focus Groups	27
APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS AND ANALYSIS GUIDE	28
.....	

A Message from the Co-Chairs

December 30, 2014

Six short months ago, Ohio's General Assembly passed legislation creating the Workforce Integration Task Force. Requested as part of Governor John R. Kasich's Mid-Biennium Review, the task force was charged with gathering and analyzing data in order to make recommendations regarding barriers to employment and income parity for Ohioans who are deaf or blind. The goal is to better understand the current employment environment for deaf and blind communities, and as a result, develop effective strategies aimed at helping these citizens, like all Ohioans, reach their highest employment potential.

The pages that follow present the results of this important and foundational work. This report synthesizes the findings from surveys, focus groups and an exhaustive literature review. Task force members analyzed the results, discussed their own life and work experiences, and identified multiple recommendations.

To some extent, the task force's findings confirmed what many of us knew from our own experiences. Not only do employers have much to learn about workers with disabilities and how to effectively integrate them into Ohio's workforce, but Ohio's deaf and blind communities need greater access to career training and development. Perhaps the most encouraging finding, however, was that although barriers to employment exist, many of them can be reduced through increased awareness and engagement on the part of employers. This means we are in a position to make a significant difference in the lives of Ohioans who are blind, deaf, or deafblind.

Of course, this report represents just the first step. The next phase will require action on the part of employers and the disability community. We are grateful to the task force members for volunteering their time and energy to this important work, and look forward to seeing the results in the lives of the people we serve and the positive impact on Ohio's economy.

Cynthia C. Dungey, Director
Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

Kevin L. Miller, Director
Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities



Executive Summary

Background

House Bill 483 of the 130th Ohio General Assembly established the Workforce Integration Task Force (WIT) to be co-chaired by the executive director of the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities Agency (OOD) and the director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). The co-chairs were given authority to appoint the remaining task force members.

The task force was charged with making recommendations regarding how deaf and blind Ohioans “may be more fully integrated into the workforce to increase employability and income parity” and issuing a report to the Governor no later than January 1, 2015. Upon the issuance of its report, the task force ceases to exist.

Through a process of data and information gathering, a series of in person meetings, conference calls, and regular interaction and dialogue, the WIT worked together to produce this report. A fundamental theme emerged: the need for significantly greater and broader awareness and understanding of the issues facing Ohioans with disabilities; specifically those who are blind, deaf, and deafblind. Individuals who recruit, hire, train and retain employees too often lack an appropriate level of awareness and knowledge regarding the disability community. As a result, they may not provide the necessary services and communication, and instead inadvertently create barriers to employment and full community integration.

This work led the task force to identify the following barriers:

- A disconnect between Ohio employers’ need for qualified and dedicated workers and the available talents, skills and abilities of blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans;
- The specific, tangible benefits of integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce are not widely known or effectively and consistently communicated to employers;
- Employers often fail to understand, or appropriately plan for, the reasonable accommodations Ohioans with disabilities need upon entering the workforce;
- Employers act, or fail to act, based on misunderstandings and/or fears about performance, safety and liability issues related to hiring individuals with disabilities;
- Workforce integration services and programs available for Ohio employees and employers are not widely known or effectively and consistently communicated;
- State and federal programs inadvertently create disincentives to work through asset and income limits;
- Employers fail to adopt and implement uniform and quality standards for services offered to blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals;
- Ohioans with disabilities often lack critical vocational and career planning skills and the appropriate training opportunities to acquire them are not always widely available;
- Ohio’s transportation system often lacks effective options and services for Ohioans with disabilities.

Ohio is well positioned to lead efforts to tackle these broad and often daunting barriers and challenges. Ohio can be a national leader in the education and training of employers and employees in the benefits of integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce; ensuring that all employees and employers are aware of and sensitive to the challenges facing Ohioans with disabilities. We can also work to ensure that all services and programs provide truly equal access and necessary accommodations that enable a path toward employment and independence for all.

A focused campaign to position Ohio as a leader in this area would not only result in a significant increase in the number of blind, deaf and deafblind individuals employed, but it would boost morale, productivity and economic growth across the state's economy.

To start on a path towards achieving these goals, the task force makes the following recommendations:

1. OOD and ODJFS should work collaboratively to create, collect and communicate clear, uniform and comprehensive information to employers about integrating blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans into the workforce.
2. OOD and ODJFS should develop strategies to more effectively engage business leadership organizations and networks to facilitate business to business and peer to peer conversations on how best to address and reduce barriers to employment and income parity for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans.
3. The state of Ohio should seek out ways to more effectively build a culture of inclusion and accessibility by including disability awareness in any required diversity and inclusion training programs; and through the development of mentoring and relationship-building opportunities.
4. Ohio should encourage and facilitate opportunities to connect blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans with employers and to connect employers interested in integrating individuals with disabilities into their workforce with those who have successfully implemented such integration.
5. All Ohio employers should commit themselves to developing standards and benchmarks for effectively serving individuals with disabilities in key areas including: communications and education; access and accommodation; and hiring and employment.
6. OOD should work with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation (OWT) to coordinate a working group of related agencies and programs to develop a unified

plan to more effectively align state of Ohio employment and workforce programs and services for Ohioans with disabilities.

- 7.** State and federal governments should explore ways to remove disincentives to work that result from income and asset limits for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans.
- 8.** The state of Ohio should ensure that pre-vocational and vocational training is available and accessible for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans throughout the state.
- 9.** Ohio should explore ways to better leverage the facilities, programs, and services available in order to create immersive and hands on training opportunities for blind, deaf and deafblind communities across the state.
- 10.** Ohio should continue to pursue a more integrated and wider-ranging system of transportation for individuals with disabilities in both urban and rural areas and to explore options to reduce transportation as a barrier to employment for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans.

Introduction

As noted above, House Bill 483 established the Workforce Integration Task Force (WIT) to be co-chaired by the executive director of the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities Agency (OOD) and the director of the Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), who were given authority to appoint the remaining task force members.

The agency directors finalized the composition of the task force by adding seven members with diverse backgrounds and experience. The membership includes Ohioans from the deaf and blind communities; representatives from the business community, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders; and those with an academic background in disability issues. (*See Appendix A for biographies of task force members*).

Workforce Integration Task Force (WIT) Members

Kevin L. Miller, Co-Chair, Executive Director, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities

Cynthia C. Dungey, Co-Chair, Director, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

Deborah Kendrick, Independent Journalist

John Moore, CEO/Executive Director, Deaf Services Center

Dr. J.W. Smith, Professor of Speech Communication, Ohio University

Steve Brubaker, Chief of Staff, InfoCision

Sherry Williams, President and CEO, Prevent Blindness, Ohio Affiliate

Dr. Jamie McCartney, Coordinator, ASL/English Interpreting Program, Kent State University

Arlon Nash, Teacher, Springfield High School

Data and Information Collection

In preparation for the work of the task force, staff at OOD and ODJFS collected relevant data and information, as outlined in the enabling legislation, through a review of available literature, the development and deployment of a set of questionnaires/surveys, and by conducting focus groups throughout the state.

Given the timeframe and costs involved, it was not possible for WIT to conduct a large-scale professional survey focused on the data elements included in the enabling legislation. There are, however, surveys such as the *Current Population Survey* and the *American Community Survey*, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, which provide high-quality relevant data.

Agency staff also developed informal surveys targeted for three groups: members of the blindness and deafness communities; employers; and service providers, advocates and parents. Staff conducted 17 focus groups, in six different regions of the state, with Ohioans who are

blind or deaf and working (or seeking work) to talk about barriers to employment and recommendations. (*Further details available in Appendix B*)

Task force members used this data, along with their own knowledge and experience, to identify the major barriers to employment and income parity for people who are deaf, blind, or deaf-blind.

Note on Terminology Used in this Report

In most surveys, people self-identify as deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. These terms embrace any degree of vision or hearing loss that seriously affects an individual's ability to perceive information readily evident to someone who has usual degrees of vision and hearing. Our research ranged from those with mild impairments to those who have become blind or deaf due to illness or injury and, finally, to those born totally blind or deaf. For the purposes of this report, the terms "blind" and "deaf" include the entire range of vision and hearing loss.

It is also worth noting that the deaf community prefers to capitalize the term (i.e. Deaf). For consistency and uniformity, however, the phrase "blind, deaf, and deafblind" is used throughout this report to describe these individuals and communities.

Background

In order to place the WIT findings and recommendations into the appropriate context, it is helpful to review some of the underlying data:

- More than 250,000 Ohioans are blind or have a vision disability and more than 416,000 are deaf or have a hearing disability.¹
- Disabilities are more common with age, but among Ohioans age 18-64, about 132,000 are blind or have a vision disability and about 159,000 are deaf or have a hearing disability. This is about 1.9 percent and 2.2 percent, respectively, of Ohio's 18-to-64 age population.
- Ohioans with disabilities are less likely to be in the labor force than those without disabilities.
 - Among Ohioans in the labor force, the unemployment rate for those who are deaf or have a hearing disability was about 13.3 percent and for those who are blind or have a vision disability, 18.9 percent.² The unemployment rate for all Ohioans in the labor force was 8.3 percent. [It is important to note that these figures do not include a large portion of Ohioans who are blind, deaf or deafblind who are underemployed or have abandoned the job search.]
- Earnings among individuals with disabilities tend to be lower. Median earnings for those with a disability were \$18,341 compared to \$30,074 for those without a disability.³

¹ American Community Survey 2011-2013 data.

² American Community Survey 2011-2013 data. These data are different from the unemployment statistics reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. They are, however, useful in showing differences between groups.

³ American Community Survey 2011-2013 data.

- Data from Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities shows that among those using OOD's services, average hourly wages upon employment averaged \$13.62 for those with a vision impairment and \$13.57 for those with a hearing impairment, significantly below the average hourly wage of \$20.76 for all occupations in Ohio.⁴
- According to the 2012 Cornell Report, income disparity for Ohio's full-time workers with a visual disability is more significant than for Ohioans with a hearing disability.
 - Median earnings for Ohioans with visual impairments are almost 25 percent lower than for individuals without a disability.
 - Median earnings for individuals with a hearing disability are almost equivalent to those without a disability. [Note: most people categorized as having a hearing disability developed hearing loss later in life, after already establishing careers prior to the onset of their disability.]

Key Task Force Findings on Barriers to Employment

WIT determined that the barriers to employment and income parity among blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans are symptoms of a larger issue: a fundamental lack of awareness and knowledge about individuals with disabilities, their culture, their strengths and weaknesses, the challenges they face, and the opportunities they can provide. This in turn fuels a lack of knowledge about the benefits of integrating these individuals into the workforce. Additionally, many blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans lack the necessary skills for developing a successful career path in today's economy and access to the training opportunities needed to acquire them.

Specific Barriers

The task force specifically identified the following important barriers:

- A disconnect between Ohio employers' need for qualified and dedicated workers and the available talents, skills and abilities of blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans;
- The specific, tangible benefits of integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce are not widely known or effectively and consistently communicated to employers;
- Employers often fail to understand, or appropriately plan for, the reasonable accommodations Ohioans with disabilities need upon entering the workforce;
- Employers act, or fail to act, based on misunderstandings and/or fears about performance, safety and liability issues related to hiring individuals with disabilities;
- Workforce integration services and programs available for Ohio employees and employers are not widely known or effectively and consistently communicated;
- State and federal programs inadvertently create disincentives to work through asset and income limits;
- Employers fail to adopt and implement uniform and quality standards for services offered to blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals;
- Ohioans with disabilities often lack critical vocational and career planning skills and the appropriate training opportunities to acquire them are not always widely available;

⁴ OOD wage data on successful job outcomes from October 2010 to May 2014. Ohio 2013 average hourly wage from the Occupation Employment Statistics program of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

- Ohio's transportation system often lacks effective options and services for Ohioans with disabilities.

Benefits of Workforce Integration

WIT identified a clear need for increased education and training targeted towards employers on the benefits, available incentives and services, and successful practices involved in recruiting, hiring and retaining Ohioans who are blind, deaf, or deafblind. Currently, too many employers lack even basic knowledge about how to recruit, hire and promote people with disabilities.

Many employers lack an understanding and awareness of the talents, skills and abilities of blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans and the disability community more broadly. As a result employers do not view this group of Ohioans as a resource and talent pool and so do not explore integrating these individuals into their workforce, despite an often-stated need for greater access to qualified and dedicated workers. Clearly, a disconnect exists between what employers need and want and what Ohioans with disabilities have to offer.

Similarly, employers do not have a clear understanding of the benefits of integrating blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals into their workforce. Experience shows that integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce has a positive impact on business morale, productivity and profitability. Integration can bring higher retention rates, lower absenteeism and higher productivity. Individuals with disabilities have proven to be dedicated, conscientious, and highly productive workers when given the opportunity. Meanwhile, businesses frequently note the cost of high turnover and absenteeism and the need for qualified workers.

Educating employers on the benefits of workforce integration is critical to overcoming these knowledge gaps and barriers but too often information is fragmented across agencies and organizations; and across programs, services, and access points.

Reasonable Accommodations – Attitudes and Available Services

In 2011, researchers H. Stephen Kaye, Lita H. Jans, and Erica C. Jones examined attitudes among HR professionals and supervisors at companies that had been identified as resistant to hiring persons with disabilities⁵. Common reasons companies might not hire persons with disabilities included: the cost of accommodations, lack of awareness in how to deal with workers with disabilities and their accommodation needs, fear of being stuck with a worker who cannot be disciplined or fired because of a possible lawsuit, difficulty in assessing an applicant's ability to perform job tasks, concerns over supervisory time, concerns over work quality, lack of job candidates with disabilities, and a perception that workers with disabilities cannot perform essential job duties.

The surveys conducted for this task force validate these findings and indicate that the attitudes of those in hiring and management roles greatly impact the career opportunities for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans. Employers who responded to the task force survey identify concerns about accommodations and safety as the number one reason they do not target deaf and blind applicants for

⁵ Why Don't Employers Hire and Retain Workers with Disabilities? H. Stephen Kaye, Lita H. Jans, and Erica C. Jones
<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10926-011-9302-8>

employment. Employer concerns about medical, legal and safety issues also create reluctance or fear to address these topics.

In the survey of the deaf and blindness communities, employer attitude toward disability was overwhelmingly identified by job seekers as the number one barrier to employment (65%). In the survey of deaf and vision service providers, employer concerns for liability and safety ranked as the number one barrier (73.4%). In the employer survey, employers themselves highlighted concerns about liability and safety as a top concern (61.1%).

Employers also often fail to anticipate and plan for the necessary accommodations and services needed to effectively integrate their workforce. According to the Job Accommodation Network, many employers do not think about how they will support a person with disabilities until they encounter someone during the hiring process. As a consequence, these employers have little understanding of how to provide reasonable accommodations. This ad hoc rather than strategic planning is a barrier to employment and effective integration.

WIT focus group responses also indicated that employers are not sure how to best onboard people with disabilities and help them integrate into their company culture. For example, one focus group participant said, “You are in a position of continually having to teach other people about your disability.”

The impact of these myths, fears, and misunderstandings can be significantly reduced as barriers to employment and successful workforce inclusion through focused education, awareness and training. There are many services currently available to help employers in this area. However, this requires a much wider distribution of information on available services and programs designed to help employers both understand the issue of accommodations and the resources available.

Disincentives to Work

The receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) may also influence whether people pursue part-time or full-time employment. OOD consumers who attained employment but are still receiving SSI/SSDI benefits tend to work fewer hours and therefore earn less income from employment than people who are not receiving SSI/SSDI benefits. In addition, the average hourly wage of individuals that work more hours is higher than those who work fewer hours or part-time. Concerns about loss of benefits can be a barrier to employment and further exacerbate the income gap. State income or asset limits may create similar disincentives to work or to working full-time.

Inclusion and Accessibility

The attitudes and knowledge of those making decisions about the recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of individuals with disabilities are critical, but peers and fellow employee attitudes are also an important element of successful workforce integration for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans. A lack of awareness and sensitivity to the challenges Ohioans with disabilities face, the skills and talents they offer, and the accommodations they may require can create barriers and hinder effective workforce integration. A lack of direct relationships within and between employers when it comes to Ohioans with disabilities can also be a barrier.

Diversity and inclusion programs and training sessions are a common aspect of human resources departments and employer engagement activity. The issues surrounding disability, however, are not always included so an opportunity to raise awareness and remove barriers is missed.

Accessibility is also a significant barrier to employment. Whether it is getting to work on time, asking directions, filling out an application, or convincing an employer that you deserve a raise, access is an element that pervades all aspects of life as a member of Ohio's blindness or deafness community. Whereas a sighted or hearing Ohioan can be reasonably certain that spoken or written information will be available as a job seeker or as an employee, this is often not the case for those with vision or hearing loss. Even when information is ostensibly available, it is common to find low-quality products and services when accessing Internet content, Brailled materials or interpreters. This is why so many Ohioans who are blind, deaf or deafblind can become frustrated and possibly abandon a job search.

WIT members were able to point to examples, from employment advertising to the application process, where significant improvements could be made at little or no cost to the entities involved and yet result in improved services for the blind, deaf, and deafblind job seeker. WIT surveys and focus groups noted that trouble with access begins at the front door, or at the first webpage, with an often laborious sign-in process.

Barriers also include dauntingly bureaucratic testing language or position descriptions, minimum qualifications, and licensure standards that unnecessarily exclude Ohioans with disabilities. One example is the specific demand on many state job applications for a valid driver's license despite the fact that needing to drive is not an essential qualification for the position (a driver's license is likely being used simply as identification but no alternative is offered or listed). Another would be requirements for vision or hearing tests that unnecessarily exclude individuals with disabilities from positions where acute hearing or vision is not an essential function (e.g. requiring a hearing test for a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) or a vision test in order to be certified as a teacher).

Uniform and quality standards for services offered to blind, deaf and deafblind individuals is thus critical to their ability to find and retain employment. If these individuals can't access important information and services on an equally effective basis, or are unnecessarily exclude from the applicant pool, they will be at a competitive disadvantage.

Skills Training and Career Planning

It was once possible to be trained in a trade or specific skill and find employment in a specific industry and thereby acquire a long term, stable career. Individuals with disabilities frequently benefited from this available path to employment. The path to employment in today's job market, however, is often more complex and fluid and may require constant re-training to keep up with technology. Navigating the system and the frequent retraining can be a challenge for the blind, deaf, and deafblind communities. In order to be able to acquire in-demand skills, these individuals must have access to the training and career services available to the general public, in a location and format that is appropriate.

Focus group members expressed dissatisfaction regarding accessibility to the training and career services offered to their non-deaf or non-blind counterparts. Deaf attendees stated that they could not sign up for some services because service providers would not accept relay calls. When they were finally able to sign up for training, the training itself was not culturally accessible to them. Finally, they had difficulty obtaining reliable interpreting and extra time for tests.

Blind attendees could not access certain training programs because the written or electronic material was not accessible. Some attendees stated that they lack the basic computer skills to benefit from electronic information. Other attendees stated that electronic information may have been available, but the computer monitors were not large enough, or speech software was not available for their reading needs. All of this points to a need for both effective service standards and more widely accessible and available training options.

Transportation

In nearly every survey taken, and in every conversation about the challenges and barriers facing individuals with disabilities, transportation is at or near the top of the list. The lack of available and reliable transportation options is without a doubt a significant barrier to blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans finding and retaining employment.

Recommendations

Once the task force identified and outlined the above barriers to employment and income parity, the following recommendations were developed on how best to begin reducing and removing these barriers.

We are confident that implementing the recommendations that follow will spur job and income growth and community integration for individuals with disabilities across Ohio. By focusing on both the outstanding barriers to employment, and enabling long term career success, the recommendations will position Ohio employers to fill critical workforce needs and develop a more stable and productive workforce. Additionally, more people with disabilities will be able to achieve and retain employment, therefore not only reducing the draw on government services, but also allowing them to contribute to the economy and become more independent.

Recommendation #1: OOD and ODJFS Collaboration on Uniform and Effective Communication

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) should work collaboratively to create, collect and communicate clear, uniform and comprehensive information to employers about integrating blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans into the workforce.

Employers in Ohio need targeted outreach and educational material on how to recruit, interview, hire, retain, and promote individuals with disabilities. The information must also be made available to all workforce development programs in the State of Ohio so that employers receive accurate and uniform information. Workforce development staff should have training on the information so that Ohio

employers have the support they need regardless of the agency or program serving as the contact or entry point.

Topics that should be included:

- Information on Ohio's vocational rehabilitation program as well as the services offered to employers across all education, training and workforce programs.
- Availability of sensitivity and awareness training, mentorship programs, and on-the-job training opportunities.
- Economic incentives available to businesses that hire employees with disabilities.
- Technical assistance and continuing education to employers on reasonable accommodations.

The task force strongly believes that clearly articulating, and more effectively and uniformly promoting, the business case for hiring blind, deaf, and deafblind applicants, along with providing training on accommodations and liability concerns, is a critical step in removing barriers to employment and career success.

Recommendation #2: Business to Business Engagement

OOD and ODJFS should jointly develop strategies to more effectively engage business leadership organizations and networks to facilitate business to business, and peer to peer, conversations about reducing barriers to employment and income parity for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans.

The Business Leadership Network (OHBLN)⁶ is well positioned to play a role in engaging the business community on addressing barriers to employment for Ohioans who are blind, deaf and deafblind (and Ohioans with disabilities more broadly). The agencies should work with the membership of OHBLN on how best to strengthen and grow the reach and impact of business to business communications and programs.

OOD and ODJFS should also seek input and collaboration from organizations like the Ohio Chamber of Commerce (and local chambers of commerce), the National Federation of Independent Businesses Ohio chapter, the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants, and the Ohio Business Roundtable. These organizations, and others, need to be integrated into a statewide network that can discuss barriers to employment for Ohioans with disabilities, explore strategies and approaches to removing or reducing those barriers, and share the benefits of workforce integration for employers. In order to learn from and be mentored by those representing the cultures of blindness and deafness themselves, such a network should also invite participation by representatives from consumer organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind, Ohio Association of Deafblind, etc.

⁶ The Ohio Business Leadership Network (OHBLN) is an affiliate of the United States Business Leadership Network (USBLN), a national organization that promotes the business imperative to include people with disabilities in the workforce using a business-to-business model. <http://ohiobltn.org/>

Recommendation #3: Building a Culture of Diversity & Inclusion

The state of Ohio should seek out ways to more effectively build a culture of inclusion and accessibility by ensuring that disability awareness is included in any required diversity and inclusion training programs; and through the development of mentoring and relationship-building opportunities.

Some areas to explore would include:

Disability is Diversity

The state of Ohio is a significant employer and has the opportunity to be a role model on issues pertaining to integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce. The state should therefore explore opportunities to more effectively build equality and accessibility into its workforce and culture.

As noted above, awareness and sensitivity to the challenges and opportunities faced by blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals by both employers and employees is an important element of identifying and breaking down barriers. Disability, however, is not always included in traditional diversity and inclusion training opportunities and programs which mean this awareness, knowledge and sensitivity may not develop or do so in a uniform and effective fashion. Ohio should look for ways to incorporate disability awareness and training into its larger diversity and inclusion policies, procedures, and training programs to ensure a basic and uniform level of knowledge for employees.

It is also worth exploring whether employees who are involved in workforce development, human resources, and policy development on issues surrounding these topics should complete more in-depth training in order to better understand the larger issues surrounding the recruiting, hiring and retaining of people with disabilities.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a potentially powerful tool in breaking down barriers and building relationships. Mentoring fosters increased awareness and knowledge about the disability community, the challenges people with disabilities face, and the skills and resources they offer while at the same time giving individuals with disabilities the opportunity to learn more about employers, and potential employers, and their job seeking peers and colleagues.

Both sides benefit through these relationships. Blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals would benefit from being mentored by both employer leaders and by peers in order to better understand what it takes to succeed in a given industry or career and what options are available, etc. Employers would benefit from being mentored in order to better understand the perspective of people with disabilities, their challenges, as well as their skills and talents. Direct connections between people make knowledge and awareness concrete and real in a way that basic training does not.

The focus groups confirmed the importance of Ohioans with disabilities themselves interacting with Ohio employers and sharing their experiences and expertise in workforce integration. “It’s a good idea

for groups to go to employers and show, not tell, what they can do even with a disability,” noted a participant.

And according to the National Council on Disability, a survey of employers found that 59 percent rated mentoring as "effective" or "very effective" for reducing barriers to employment, or for advancement for people with disabilities in their organizations.

Affinity Groups

Affinity Groups, employer-sponsored entities comprised of employees who have shared interests and experiences and have at one time felt underrepresented in the workplace, are also worth exploring. Focus groups often indicated that the information and experience sharing that peers with similar disabilities provide are powerful tools in promoting independence and generating job satisfaction.

Ohio should develop mentoring and relationship-building opportunities within its workforce to further build a culture of diversity and inclusion and to foster effective integration of blind, deaf, and deafblind individuals.

Recommendation #4: Explore Ways to Connect Employers with Individuals with Disabilities

Ohio should encourage and facilitate opportunities to connect blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans with employers and to connect employers interested in integrating individuals with disabilities into their workforce with those who have successfully implemented such integration.

As noted above, mentoring is a potentially powerful tool to identify and remove barriers to employment and to create a culture of diversity and inclusion that fosters successful workforce integration. The State of Ohio can be a role model in this effort, but it should also encourage connections between blind, deaf and deafblind Ohioans with businesses seeking to more effectively integrate their workforce and help facilitate employer to employer mentoring and relationship building opportunities.

Employer to Employer Connections

Employers that hire people with disabilities are in the unique position to assist other businesses with the most effective approaches to the recruiting, hiring, and onboarding of employees with disabilities and are in a position to mentor one another to dispel myths, share trade strategies, and provide mutual support.

Some Ohio businesses such as Procter and Gamble already have disability mentoring projects underway and are enjoying success. Such companies should be encouraged to reach out to the wider business community to share their success and offer advice on effective implementation of similar programs and strategies. The OHBLN can also play a lead role in facilitating these connections.

Connecting with Businesses

As discussed above, Ohio’s disability community would benefit from stronger connections and relationships with employers. If there are ways the State of Ohio can help connect blind, deaf, and

deafblind individuals with the business community it should take advantage of those opportunities. These direct relationships would strengthen the business community and foster greater employment and independence for Ohioans with a disability.

Task force conducted focus groups and the Employer survey also highlighted the fact that once one member of the blindness or deafness community is on-boarded with a given employer, that individual often paves the way by example, or by networking, for others to apply successfully. Like-disability and like-occupation networking is an effective support tool for this process, providing ongoing advice, creative ideas on accommodations and peer support.

Recommendation #5: Developing Standards for Services

All Ohio employers should commit themselves to developing standards and benchmarks for effectively serving individuals with disabilities in key areas including communications and education, access and accommodation, and hiring and employment.

A lack of clear and uniform service and accessibility standards is clearly a barrier to employment. Truly equal access to services, training, and information is critical to successful employment. Unfortunately, unequal access and low quality service is something frequently encountered by blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans seeking employment, retention and promotion.

Ohio employers should be encouraged to develop standards for serving Ohioans with disabilities and regularly reviewing their policies, procedures, and services to measure their success.

Areas for employers to consider when developing these standards and benchmarks include:

- **Communications:** All print, web based, and audio/visual information should be accessible to deaf and blind Ohioans (including quality captioning and interpreting).
 - Online job postings, applications, company information, and all state agency online presences should be in compliance with guidelines provided by the Web Accessibility Initiative to ensure accessibility to Ohioans who are blind or do not read conventional print.
- **Access and Accommodations:** Ohioans who are deaf and blind should be able to receive the same level of service as those who do not have disabilities:
 - Facility accessibility
 - Equal access and effectiveness for in person training and meetings
 - Available and knowledgeable staff
 - Clear policies/procedures for reasonable accommodations
- **Hiring and Employment**
 - Appropriate levels of awareness and sensitivity training for HR staff
 - Access and ease of use for applications, testing, interviews, etc.
 - Reviewing and removing unintended barriers created through unnecessary or overly specific qualifications, descriptions, or testing (i.e. State ID not driver's license, hearing and vision tests, etc.)

A commitment to developing standards and setting benchmarks will help identify barriers to employment and ineffective recruitment, hiring and onboarding processes and procedures.

In addition to ensuring that quality services are being provided and building a stronger and more effective workforce, this commitment will also generate significant goodwill among Ohio's disability community; a potentially impactful market segment for businesses.

Recommendation # 6: Working Group on Program Alignment

OOD should work with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation (OWT) to coordinate a working group of related agencies and programs to develop a unified plan to more effectively align State of Ohio employment and workforce programs and services for Ohioans with disabilities.

The recently passed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), is moving federal law toward unified state workforce development plans using specific standards and metrics to measure progress toward shared goals. The state of Ohio has already worked with stakeholders and local providers to develop a unified plan, which includes the Workforce Investment Act, Adult and Basic Literacy Education, and Carl Perkins funding. This recommendation will build upon that unified plan and will now include OOD's resources as required under WIOA. This addition will allow for better program alignment among agencies and ensure that programs are effectively working together to serve Ohioans with disabilities and that available resources are being leveraged and spent under the guidance of a statewide strategic plan. This alignment would also mean serving more people and doing so more effectively.

WIT saw a strong consensus when it comes to better cross-agency program and services alignment. Case after case was described in focus groups of those with visual impairments reliant on alternate transportation being shuttled from one office to another, and from groups of Ohioans who are deaf, arriving only to find a less-than-competent interpreter, and more often, no interpreter at all.

Particular collaboration suggestions focused on not only OOD and ODJFS collaboration and streamlining, but also efforts to include other agencies that commonly provide an array of services to people who are blind, deaf, and deafblind. These include, but are not limited to, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation, the Ohio Department of Aging, the Ohio Department of Medicaid; and many law enforcement and criminal justice entities.

Better program alignment also gives an opportunity for the State of Ohio and other government entities to investigate cost-sharing and information-sharing options in the provision of accommodations to Ohio constituents. This also builds a natural support system for ensuring that agencies explore and consider the service standards suggested earlier in this report.

Building off the success of the state's current unified plan, this working group would be in a position to jump start Ohio's program alignment in anticipation of WIOA requirements. This will help ensure that all of Ohio's workforce and employment related programs and services are effectively serving blind, deaf and deafblind job seekers and the disability community more broadly.

Recommendation #7: Disincentives to Work

State and federal governments should explore ways to remove disincentives to work that result from income and asset limits for Ohioans who are blind, deaf and deafblind.

As discussed above, the receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) can influence whether people pursue part-time or full-time employment.

OOD consumers who attained employment but are still receiving SSI/SSDI benefits tend to work fewer hours and therefore earn less income from employment than people who are not receiving SSI/SSDI benefits. In addition, the average hourly wage of individuals that work more hours is higher than those who work fewer hours or part-time.

Ohio policies, rules and regulations may have the same effect, since Ohioans who are blind, deaf, and deafblind are naturally worried about losing access to important benefits. Even if the employment opportunity affords a great income, some are reluctant to lose current income benefits for the possibility of greater future income.

These rules and regulations in effect create a barrier to effective employment and reduce income parity. Government at the state and federal level should explore ways to remove these disincentives and encourage employment without threatening benefits. In the long run, the benefits of successful employment will outweigh the cost of a transition period for benefits.

Recommendation #8: Access to Pre-vocational and Vocational Training

Pre-vocational and vocational training for Ohioans who are blind, deaf and deafblind should be available and accessible throughout Ohio.

Ensuring that job seekers of all ages not only acquire the skills and qualifications required for available and in-demand jobs, but also have the skills necessary to successfully navigate today's job market is a fundamental element of workforce development in Ohio. Like many without disabilities, however, individuals who are blind, deaf and deafblind often lack the soft skills and competencies needed to conduct a job search, network with potential employers, effectively interview, negotiate employment, and build a career.

In order to encourage and facilitate the acquisition of these skills, equal access and availability is critical. Ohioans who are blind, deaf, and deafblind should have access to the same vocational training, programs and services as Ohioans who are non-disabled.

OhioMeansJobs Centers

Survey data from Ohioans who are blind, deaf, and deafblind indicates that the second largest barrier to employment is a lack of available jobs. At the same time, employers indicate that their largest barrier to hiring people with disabilities is a lack of applicants. OhioMeansJobs centers stand in a unique position to bridge this gap between qualified workers and available jobs. Given this reality, a review of all OhioMeansJobs centers should be conducted to ensure that Ohioans who are blind, deaf, and deafblind have equal access to employment training and job seeking services.

Specific Training for Deaf and/or Blind Ohioans

Accessibility for deaf people goes beyond ensuring that sign language interpreting or captioning is available. Studies indicate that instruction from a person who can communicate directly with the deaf person is far more effective than instruction via a sign language interpreter. While interpreters are very valued in the deaf community, introducing a third person into a scenario will almost always dilute the timing, meaning, and effectiveness of communication. With this in mind, increased vocational services specifically designed for and targeting deaf and/or blind Ohioans should also be explored and encouraged.

Recommendation #9: Immersive and Hands on Training

Ohio should explore ways to better leverage the facilities, programs, networks, and services currently available in order to create immersive and hands on training opportunities for blind, deaf and deafblind communities across the state.

Some members of the task force emphasized that a residential or immersive training center is crucial for developing self-confidence, alternative skills and socialization needs. Specifically for those who lose vision as adults and therefore lack the auditory, tactile and literacy skills that blind children pick up naturally and through special education.

There is a strong network of Community Centers for the Deaf, vision centers, Deaf Studies and/or Interpreter Training Programs at universities, and other non-profit institutions across Ohio that provide specific services to the deaf and blind communities.

In the blindness community, however, a great loss was suffered in 2012 when Columbus-based Vision and Vocational Services (formerly Vision Center 1927-2008) closed down. Like other centers in Cincinnati, Toledo and Cleveland, this nonprofit served as a training, social and workshop employment center for low-vision needs in Central Ohio. Its closure left the Central Ohio region unserved. Given its central location, the population involved, and the connection to state government and other important resources, the need in Central Ohio is particularly acute. Short-term residential training centers for blind and visually impaired adults in such states as Maryland, Louisiana, Colorado, and others have documented the increased job acquisition and retention of adults who experience such immersion training in the independence and adaptive skills of blindness.

In the deaf community, no residential or immersive programs exist for adults in Ohio. The Comprehensive Program for the Deaf (housed at the Columbus Speech and Hearing Center) stopped providing residential services a decade or more ago and the Ohio School for the Deaf in Columbus serves K-12 students who live outside Franklin and contiguous counties. Deaf individuals often spend their entire lives within the hearing world. Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents, the majority of whom do not sign. With the mainstreaming of deaf students in schools, this results in deaf individuals with little to no interaction with peers, mentors and role models who are deaf.

Given the potential benefits of immersive and hands on education and training for independence, employment and quality of life, Ohio should explore ways to better leverage existing resources, facilities, programs, and services to create a statewide network of these type of training and educational opportunities.

Recommendation #10: Transportation

Ohio should continue to pursue a more integrated and wider-ranging system of transportation for individuals with disabilities in both urban and rural Ohio and to explore options to reduce transportation as a barrier to employment for blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans.

As mentioned in the barriers section above, in nearly every survey taken, and in every conversation, about the challenges and barriers facing individuals with disabilities, transportation is at or near the top of the list. The lack of available and reliable transportation options is without a doubt a significant barrier to blind, deaf, and deafblind Ohioans finding and retaining employment. It is a component of access just like those areas discussed above. It will have to be addressed in order to truly spur increased employment and income opportunities for Ohio's blind, deaf, and deafblind.

There are a number of ongoing activities and research on this topic being conducted by agencies and organizations throughout Ohio. Those projects should continue and will hopefully provide concrete recommendations for improvement.

A few areas for further consideration:

- Para-transit and other transportation related services and programs are often administered or funded at the county level. This creates barriers and complications for job seekers crossing county borders for employment.
 - Focus groups in the Cleveland area praised the region's transportation system which crosses county lines.
- Ride sharing companies like Uber and Lyft may provide options that were heretofore unavailable at least in urban areas.
- Employers seeking to expand their talent pool and integrate Ohioans with disabilities into their workforce should strongly consider the role of transportation in the needs of their employees.

- Transportation vouchers, creative carpooling incentives, company-provided drivers or other accommodations may provide effective solutions to individual needs without having to undertake system wide changes.
- The states of Minnesota and Washington have the reputation as having the best transportation systems for the blind, deaf, and deafblind. They may provide models and examples for policy makers seeking to improve Ohio's system of transportation.
 - Members of the ODOT Transit Needs Study team also found that these two states (specifically Seattle and Minneapolis-St. Paul) are models for effective transit services for all ridership. This demonstrates the finding that, when public transportation systems innovate for the general community, they are likely to positively impact riders with disabilities, including those who are blind, deaf, and deafblind.

Conclusion

In many respects, effectively integrating individuals who are blind, deaf, and deafblind into the workforce in order to achieve equality and opportunity is a complex and difficult task. It involves federal, state and local government entities and programs, businesses of varying scope, size and industry, and a diverse population with very different needs, cultures, and circumstances. In many cases, true integration will require upending longstanding ways of doing business, overcoming the communication challenges of reaching employers of every size and industry, and changing the way people see the world.

At the same time, the task is also a simple one. It involves raising awareness about the challenges and benefits of recruiting, hiring and promoting individuals who are blind, deaf, and deafblind, setting high standards for services, and creating a culture of diversity and inclusion within Ohio's workforce where everyone is welcomed and valued for their contributions to our communities and the economy.

If implemented, the above recommendations would position Ohio as a national leader in this effort. More importantly, taking concrete action on these recommendations would serve citizens better. It would create a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and spur employment, economic growth and a better quality of life for many Ohioans.

The impact on individuals who are blind, deaf, and deafblind would be significant:

- Increased independence, quality of life and career opportunities
- A welcoming and more inclusive work environment
- Greater accessibility to services and programs
- Opportunities for mentoring and leadership roles

Many of the recommendations will require determination and significant effort to enact. They will require a significant investment of time and resources. Some will involve a change in perspective and a willingness to be uncomfortable in order to learn and change.

In every case, however, the benefits of a more diverse and inclusive workforce far outweigh the costs.

Now is the time to act, to build a better state not only for individuals who are blind, deaf, and deafblind, and their families and communities, but for all Ohioans.

Appendix A: Workforce Integration Task Force Members

Steve Brubaker

Steve Brubaker began his career at InfoCision in 1985. In his current role as chief of staff, he is a member of the executive team and is responsible for HR, internal/external communications and manages InfoCision's legal and compliance departments. Brubaker is active in a number of professional organizations, including the Direct Marketing Association, Society for Consumer Affairs Professionals and Professional Association for Customer Engagement, formerly known as American Teleservices Association (ATA). He served on ATA's national board of directors over a period of two decades. In 2007 he was awarded the ATA's highest honor, the prestigious Fulcrum Award, in recognition of his extraordinary contributions to the call center industry. Mr. Brubaker also received the Simonetti Distinguished Business Alumni Award from The University of Akron in 2012 and The University of Akron Honors College Distinguished Alumni Award in 2014. Brubaker's blog at InfoCision.com provides timely and insightful recommendations for companies wishing to delight consumers with extraordinary customer service experiences.

Deborah Kendrick

Deborah Keefer Kendrick is an award-winning journalist, poet and technologist. Her newspaper column on disability rights has appeared in numerous newspapers since 1986, including the Cincinnati Enquirer, Columbus Dispatch and San Francisco Chronicle, among others. Kendrick also serves as senior features editor for AccessWorld, a technology news magazine for individuals who are blind or visually impaired published by the American Foundation for the Blind. Deborah has written the *Jobs That Matter* series of books for AFB Press, a series profiling a wide variety of blind and visually impaired individuals and the jobs they do. Her features, editorials and reviews have also appeared in numerous regional and national publications, including *Woman's Day*, *Parenting*, *Marriage and Family*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, and many others. She serves on a number of boards and councils, has three grown children, and lives in Cincinnati.

Jamie McCartney

Jamie McCartney has been a professional interpreter in Ohio for 21 years and an interpreter educator for 18 years. She is currently the coordinator for the American Sign Language/ English Interpreting Program at Kent State University. McCartney holds a doctorate in secondary education curriculum and instruction and a master's and bachelor's degree in technical education, all from the University of Akron. She also holds an associate's degree in interpreting/ transliterating for the deaf from Columbus State Community College. She has interpreted in a variety of venues, such as postsecondary, employment, medical, social services, deaf-blind and platform interpreting. She has also interpreted for Sorenson Video Relay Service, where she worked in the capacities of manager, director and video interpreter. McCartney is a member of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID), and the Ohio Chapter of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. She holds the following national certifications from RID: a certificate of transliteration, a certification of interpretation and a master-level national interpreter Certification.

John L. Moore

John L. Moore is the CEO/executive director of Deaf Services Center, Inc., a nonprofit organization committed to the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and their families throughout a 37-county service area. Moore earned a bachelor of science degree in government and history from Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. and a master's in public administration from Northeastern University in Boston. He has worked with local grass-roots organizations, as well as the public and private sector, and is currently the president of Community Shares of Mid-Ohio, where he works with 60 area nonprofits and is the first individual with a disability in this role. He

has been involved in various deafness and disability organizations and has an extensive range of experience in dealing with organizations, agencies and interest groups on the state and local levels.

Arlon Nash

Arlon Nash teaches at Springfield High School in Springfield, Ohio. Nash graduated from Bowling Green State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration. He also holds a master's degree in deaf education from McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. He is a member of the American Sign Language Teachers Association and holds a qualified certification. He is currently co-leader for the Clark County Deaf Community Organization. He also is involved as a leader in several organizations that promote leadership for the deaf and that support and cherish American Sign Language as the first and native language for individuals who are deaf.

J. Webster Smith

J. Webster Smith (J.W.) was born blind on March 9, 1959, in Chicago. Dr. Smith is a professor of speech communication in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in history and speech communication from Indiana University, his Master of Arts degree in speech communication from Purdue University, and his PhD from Wayne State University. He is a member of the National Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, National Federation of the Blind, National Federation of the Blind of Ohio (where he served as president from 2008 to 2012), and the National Association of Blind Educators. In addition, Dr. Smith has served as a member of the Ohio State Library Consumer Advisory Committee, the State Consumer Advisory Committee of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (formerly known as the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission), and the Ohio Governor's Council on People with Disabilities.

Sherill K. Williams

Sherill K. Williams has served as president and CEO of Prevent Blindness, Ohio Affiliate (PBO) since 1986. Prior to joining the PBO staff, Williams served as national director of youth volunteers for the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation and as executive director of the Fairfield County, Connecticut chapter of the March of Dimes. She received her bachelor of arts in speech/communication from the University of Minnesota and a master's in public administration/health care administration from Pace University of New York. Williams is on the advisory board of GroundWorkGroup and is a member of the Ohio Association of Nonprofit Organization's Standards of Excellence Advisory Committee. Additionally, she serves as an advisor for the Ann Ellis Fund of The Columbus Foundation and is a founding member of the SOS (Save Our Sight) Coalition, Ohio Eye Care Coalition, Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition and Ohio Aging Eye Public Private Partnership. She is a graduate of Leadership Columbus and served as a commissioner for the International Year of the Child Presidential National Commission in Washington, D.C.

Appendix B: Survey Data Focus Group Summary

Questionnaires

A single questionnaire was developed for both Ohioans who are blind/low-vision and deaf/hearing-impaired. This WIT constituent questionnaire was developed using both questions from other disability surveys and group input. The SurveyMonkey questionnaire was tested for screen readers (nonvisual audience), with each question containing an embedded video of an American Sign Language translation of the question. It was not possible to distribute the questionnaire randomly to constituents. Instead, 43 organizations were asked to direct constituents to the questionnaire website.

A second questionnaire was developed for Ohio employers. Since businesses can be difficult to survey, the questionnaires were distributed by business service representatives from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services using tablets at 11 job fairs around the state. In addition, a link to the questionnaire was on the employer portion of OhioMeansJobs.com.

Due to interest generated by the constituent survey, another SurveyMonkey questionnaire was developed for a third group, which was made up of service providers, advocates and parents.

Constituent Survey

- The constituent survey generated 427 useable responses. Overall educational attainment of the respondents was above average. About 40 percent of the respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27 percent of Ohio adults 25 and older.
- Just over half the respondents were working or self-employed. Their hourly wages ranged from \$4.58 to \$52.64, with a median of \$12.50 per hour. Some respondents reported annual wages, which ranged from \$1,500 to \$200,000. The median annual wage was \$41,000. More than a third of the respondents were between ages 51 and 64, with earnings often higher than the average. Only 11 percent of the respondents said they had never worked.
- About 20 percent of respondents said they had turned down work or extra hours to keep their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. This was more common among those not working.
- About 46 percent said their disability made it very difficult or impossible to find work or be self-employed. However, among those who had worked, only 18 percent said their disability made doing a job very difficult or impossible.
- The most commonly mentioned barrier to work was employer attitudes toward disabilities (65 percent). The second most commonly mentioned barrier was the availability of jobs (58 percent).

Employer Survey

- The employer questionnaire generated 162 responses. About 66 percent of respondents said they had experience hiring or recruiting persons with disabilities, of which about 76 percent had experience hiring persons with hearing or vision impairments.
- About 74 percent said the jobs for which they were currently hiring could be especially challenging for persons with hearing or vision impairments.
- Seventy-three percent mentioned the hearing or vision requirements of jobs as a challenge for persons with hearing or vision impairments; 61 percent said safety and liability issues were a concern.

- Among non-occupational challenges, lack of applicants (37 percent) followed by transportation (33 percent) were most commonly cited.

Service Provider, Advocate and Family Survey

- The third survey generated 84 responses. Sixty-three percent of respondents said they had worked with or assisted people with a vision or hearing loss for more than 10 years.
- About 45 percent of respondents said that 25 to 74 percent of their clients, associates or family members in the vision or hearing loss communities had turned down work to maintain SSI/SSDI benefits, a notably higher percent than reported on the constituent survey.
- The barrier to employment most commonly mentioned was employer attitudes toward disabilities (82 percent), followed by availability of jobs (79 percent). Service providers most commonly mentioned safety and liability issues (73 percent) as one of the business community's perceived challenges to hiring people with disabilities. Service providers most commonly mentioned accommodation costs (73 percent) as one of the business community's perceived non-occupational challenges.

Focus Groups

Staff from Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities conducted 17 focus groups at six locations around the state. The focus groups were divided among four types of constituents: visually impaired and working, visually impaired and not working, hearing impaired and working, and hearing impaired and not working. Topics included the vocational rehabilitation system and benefits, the search for work, the effect of a disability on independent living, life on the job, and recommendations.

Findings

The following is a summary of the focus group participants' views:

- Many focus group participants felt that because of their disabilities, they had been "put in a box" with regard to their career aspirations and choices. People expressed frustration about not getting "real jobs."
- Some Ohio vocational rehabilitation consumers "skip the border" to get services in other states. Many consider Ohio's vocational rehabilitation services underfunded and behind other states.
- Many participants felt that employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities prevented them from being considered for jobs. Many experienced the lack of reasonable accommodations, both on the job and during the application and interview process. Many of those in the deaf community said it was difficult to find good interpreters. Many of those in the reading-impaired community said reading/writing technology was often inadequate.
- Although technology could be a job barrier, most participants saw the value in learning new technologies for independent living and employment.
- Among those with job experience, many said they felt the need to prove themselves or explain their disabilities on an ongoing basis. Many said they were afraid to ask for reasonable accommodations or that they made their own accommodations. Social isolation was often a problem, especially for the deaf community.
- The need for inter- and cross-agency collaboration was mentioned often. Many said services do not work well together or could work together better.
- Many mentioned the need for a deaf commission similar to those in other states. Visually impaired participants mentioned the need for reliable public or private transportation.

Appendix C: Demographics and Analysis Guide

See separately attached Demographics and Analysis Guide.