

Advancing the Wisconsin Better Bottom Line: Ideas to Increase Employment of All People with Disabilities

Overview

Employing more people with disabilities in Wisconsin's economy is an idea that has strong bipartisan support. Recently the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the employment-population ratio for people with disabilities at 18.0 compared to 65.6 for persons without disabilities.

Governor Walker continues to promote the **Better Bottom Line Initiative** that he introduced in 2014, modeled after the work by Delaware Governor Jack Markell and the National Governor's Association. While Wisconsin has made significant progress in employing persons with disabilities through the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) system and through Project Search, the state is yet to realize the full benefits of employing young people in rural communities and employing persons with intellectual disabilities and others who rely upon public benefit programs but who want to work to increase their independence.

Medicaid is the single largest payer of long-term supports for adults with disabilities in Wisconsin yet an extremely small portion of total Medicaid long-term care funding goes toward helping people to secure and sustain market-wage jobs. A significant number of these people say they want to work.

In December of 2016 the Council of State Governments and the National Conference of State Legislatures released a report (*Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities*) summarizing the progress of state legislatures nationally in improving the rate of employment of people with disabilities. Many states are adopting strategies to support and incentivize private-sector employers, improve state government operations to hire more workers with disabilities and support people with disabilities as small business owners. These **Better Bottom Line** strategies support the idea that including otherwise unemployed/underemployed persons with disabilities in the workforce can help to grow state economies.

Wisconsin Ideas

Various Wisconsin lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have been leaders in promoting **Better Bottom Line** ideas that they plan to introduce in this legislative session. The Assembly Republican Agenda: *Forward for Wisconsin's Future* includes an emphasis on employment for people with disabilities. These creative ideas, when put together in a **2017 Better Bottom Line Package**, can make Wisconsin a leader in employment of all persons with disabilities.

Employment First Proposal: Contact Rep. James Edming; Rep. Jimmy Anderson

Even though Wisconsin spends millions of dollars on public programs that support people with disabilities state agencies lack coordination and effective joint planning. Agreements on paper rarely translate to cost-effective administration and braiding of public funding. Wisconsin can realize results by requiring State agencies (DPI, DHS, DWD, DVR) to adopt Employment First policies (policies that commit to competitive integrated employment as the priority option for youth and adults with disabilities) and report on joint agency progress toward improving employment outcomes, in typical community-based competitive wage jobs. Thirty-two states have already adopted Employment First policies. **Cost: State Agency**

Implementation

Better Bottom Line Transition Incentive Grants: Contact Rep. Rob Brooks

Schools must be held accountable and supported to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth with disabilities. The **Better Bottom Line Transition Incentive Fund** (administered through DPI; 115.884) has been successful in its first year, but is significantly underfunded. This fund which was appropriated just \$100,000 in the 2015-2017 biennial budget rewards schools that prove they have moved more students into community employment at a competitive wage and into postsecondary education and training. Schools use this pay for performance funding to improve their transition programs, including providing transportation to jobs, working with area employers and providing job coaching. Due to proration of funds this year, an incentive payment that was intended to be \$1000/student was reduced to just \$75/student.

Cost: \$6.3 million over the biennium

Partners With Business Proposal: Contact: Rep. John Macco; Rep. Evan Goyke

The *Partners With Business* Proposal will include a two-year funding investment to launch and scale the successful *Partners With Business* model statewide. In Dane County alone *Partners With Business* and other employment-focused efforts have resulted in significant cost-savings to government programs, outreach to 890 businesses and earnings of people with developmental disabilities (significant disabilities) totaling more than \$3.86M in 2014. *Partners With Business* Proposal funds will pay for initial business grantee-startup costs and state level coaches/technical assistance. Private sector grantee businesses will learn how to hire and support workers with disabilities, including providing natural supports in the workplace. A two-year technical assistance investment will result in packaging the *Partners With Business* model to support other businesses and employment providers in building workplace natural supports and increase the employability of Medicaid-eligible individuals. **Cost: \$350,000 each year of the biennium; TOTAL \$700,000**

Health Care Assistant Proposal: Contact: Sen. Roger Roth Senate; Sen. Tom Tiffany; Rep. Mary Felzkowski

Wisconsin is facing a direct care workforce crisis: one in five caregiver jobs are going unfilled. A Health Care Assistant credential will give an untapped workforce – people with disabilities, and others – the opportunity to more easily enter the health care sector. Technical colleges and other entities will apply to offer an approved course. A formal credential will provide assurance to employers that anyone receiving this credential has demonstrated competency across a set of direct care skills. **Cost: State Agency**
Implementation; technical assistance investment.