Welcome from Kathleen Martinez, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor for Disability Employment Policy

It is with great excitement that I introduce the **National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD).**

Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office on Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), LEAD’s goal is to improve employment and economic advancement opportunities for people with disabilities and support their full inclusion in our workplaces. With direct input from the
disability community and other key stakeholders, the Center will identify and share best practices and policy solutions that can improve the lives and low workforce participation rates of these workers.

LEAD, however, is much more than a resource for disability information. The Center will also provide training and technical assistance to the myriad of systems in both the public and private sectors striving to fully integrate people with disabilities into the workforce. Importantly, LEAD will bring together innovative business leaders, policymakers, organizations, and individuals to create new strategies for expanding economic opportunities for people with disabilities and improving the talent available to America’s businesses.

The Center’s website will employ the latest social media tools so that it can serve as hub for providing timely and useful information on those successful employment strategies that benefit jobseekers, employers and service-providers in the workforce system. The site will feature guest blogs from thought leaders, resources on promising practices, and an interactive events calendar to encourage vigorous participation.

I am proud that the National Disability Institute will head the LEAD Center consortium and that it has gathered key partners such as the U.S. Business Leadership Network, the Employer Research Consortium, the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals, Cities for Financial Empowerment, the National Council on Independent Living, TASH, and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.

ODEP funded LEAD through a five-year cooperative agreement and I know that together we can help create a world in which people with disabilities have unlimited employment potential.

**Kathleen Martinez**
**Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor for Disability Employment Policy**

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**LEAD Center - Who We Are**

The LEAD Center – formally known as the National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD) – is a collaborative of disability, workforce and economic empowerment organizations dedicated to advancing sustainable individual and systems level change to improve competitive, integrated employment and economic self-sufficiency for all people with disabilities.

Led by National Disability Institute with funding through a five-year cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office on Disability Employment Policy, the LEAD Center brings together a range of organizations, thought leaders and best-practice innovators to expand employment, policy, leadership and economic advancement opportunities for people with disabilities. The LEAD Center will provide training and technical assistance, policy research and recommendations as well as demonstration projects designed to break down silos in existing
systems, processes and practices and foster wider understanding, adoption and integration of next-generation employment practices in both the public and private sector.

A unique feature of the LEAD Center is its executive leadership - a team that includes individuals with disabilities working side by side with leaders without disabilities fueled by a shared passion to accomplish the LEAD Center's mission. As a result, the LEAD Center is not only working on behalf of adults with disabilities, but also incorporating the vision and experience of staff with disabilities to gain insight beyond the perception of what people with disabilities “need” to ensuring the actual “voice of disability” is represented first-hand in every facet of the LEAD Center and its activities.

LEAD Center initiatives for Year One will focus on:

· Advancing effective participation for people with disabilities in the workforce development system,
· Expanding what is current state of practice that connects customized and self-employment results with the America’s Job Center system through the bundling and braiding of resources,
· Improving knowledge about Return-to-Work and Retention strategies for the mature worker based on employer practices,
· Increasing the connections between employment and economic advancement goals through services and supports available through the American Job Center network.

With four key teams – Training & Technical Assistance (TA), Demonstrations & Innovations, Public Policy and Communications – the LEAD Center will undertake a robust agenda in its first year, including:

· Working with the TASH Collaborative to focus training and TA on group discovery, customized and self-employment, and to improve system collaboration to support the bundling and braiding of resources (learn more in article below);
· Building on National Disability Institute’s work on economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities through a partnership with the Cities for Financial Empowerment, a coalition of pioneering municipal governments from across the country that advance innovative financial empowerment initiatives in their cities;
· Developing training materials for the American Job Center network to improve services to jobseekers, including individuals with hidden disabilities;
· Piloting three demonstration projects:
  o One with the National Council on Independent Living in collaboration with Centers for Independent Living across the U.S. and the American Job Centers Network to work with jobseekers with disabilities in five (5) pilot sites to assist them in moving through the public workforce system until they secure meaningful employment. (learn more in article
below); and

- A second with the national corporation Costco that focuses on their Return-to-Work and mature worker retention policies and the identification and implementation of workplace recruitment, retention, and flexibility promising practices;

- A third with selected cities to bring together financial coaching and economic empowerment activities into supports offered by American Job Centers.

- Pioneering policy priorities regarding Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act and long-term employment supports and resources, equal opportunity and access to WIA services and supports, use of performance waivers from states to better serve and support job seekers with disabilities, and Social Security reform options;

- Providing “rapid response” policy feedback and proposals regarding self-employment, economic empowerment and WIA reauthorization;

- Launching the initial LEAD Center website – www.leadcenter.org – in the first quarter of 2013, featuring best-practice resources, webinars, news, social media integration, and a robust national calendar of events as well as phased in content including blogs from thought leaders, a resource center with expected outreach to multiple audiences including individuals with disabilities.

- Reaching out to stakeholders and potential collaborators through e-newsletters, emails, blogs and partner communication.

The LEAD Center has an exciting year ahead and we hope you will be a part of it! Stay connected with our work and directly with the LEAD Center by signing up to receive this, our quarterly newsletter, in your inbox.

We look forward to working with you and sharing information as the LEAD Center joins forces with the U.S. Department of Labor Office on Disability Employment Policy in our collaboration to provide training and technical assistance, implement demonstration projects to discover effective employer practices, facilitate a first-of-its kind pilot project with Centers for Independent Living in association with American Job Centers and jobseekers with disabilities, develop policy recommendations to expand employment opportunities and enhance economic advancement and self sufficiency of individual with disabilities.

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Meet LEAD's Partners and Collaborators

The National Disability Institute and its LEAD Center are honored to be working with the following national organizations in 2013 to promote employment and economic advancement outcomes for adults with disabilities:

LEAD Center National Partners
1. National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)
2. Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)
3. National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP)
4. TASH Collaborative
5. Cities for Financial Empowerment (CFE)
6. Employer Research Consortium (ERC)
7. United States Business Leadership Network (USBLN)

**LEAD Center Dissemination Partners**
1. Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) and NCWD/ Youth
2. National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB)
3. National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions
4. National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC)
5. Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
6. NDI Consulting/ DEI Technical Assistance Center
7. Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA)
8. National Association of State Directors Developmental Disability Services (NASDDDS)
9. Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA)
10. National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA)
11. Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
12. Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)

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**NCIL joins LEAD Center to Pioneer Pilot Program with the American Job Center Network**

One of the LEAD Center’s core goals is strengthening the capacity of the workforce investment sector to maximize services to jobseekers with disabilities while providing training and resources to promote self-advocacy for people with disabilities to better use the American Job Center Network. The LEAD Center is pleased to have initiated a partnership with the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) to help accomplish this goal.

NCIL and the LEAD Center will work collaboratively on an innovative demonstration project involving linkages to select Centers for Independent Living (CILs) located across the United States that will work with job seekers with disabilities through the American Job Centers (AJCs). A target objective for this collaboration is to expand the employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities by providing training and advocacy support on various topics, including:
what to expect at an AJC, how to obtain job search assistance and training services, learning about and acquiring accommodation supports if needed, as well as understanding the pros and cons of disclosing a disability. Once recruited, CILs that have expertise in employment and established relationships with American Job Centers will work with consumers throughout the training and/or job search process to provide, or facilitate, linkages to services and supports such as counseling on the impact of employment on benefits, addressing transportation needs (when applicable), identifying and facilitating access to assistive technology and providing liaison with employers if requested.

In addition, it is anticipated that CIL staff will provide disability awareness training and technical assistance to AJC staff regarding universal access and appropriate service delivery when working with job seekers that represent a cross spectrum of disabilities. The LEAD Center has also partnered with the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP) to identify training needs, promote the initiative’s goals, and facilitate linkages with local AJC administrators and workforce boards. This demonstration project will represent the first systemic look at how CILs can perform a key role in advancing employment and economic advancement for job seekers with disabilities as CIL staffs utilize their unique expertise in consumer and community supports to improve training and employment options through the public workforce system.

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**Blending and Braiding Resources – Building on a Best Practice**

The current rate of employment for individuals with disabilities is 20.7 percent (compared to 69.2 percent for non-disabled individuals), a decline from 2011. Best practices for the full inclusion of individuals across the spectrum of disability in the workplace recognize the need to blend and braid resources from multiple funding streams toward the achievement of an individual’s employment goal. The application of best practices that require the blending and braiding of resources requires education, outreach and collaboration at the state and local level to align resources and support the individualized application of services and supports across systems.

The LEAD Center, in collaboration with the “TASH Collaborative” (TASH, Lisa Mills, Marc Gold & Associates, and Griffin & Hammis) will promote state level and local level systems change (in two selected states) to implement best practices – Discovery, Customized Employment, and Self Employment – that are most effective when accompanied by the blending and braiding of resources. At the state level, the TASH Collaborative will work across systems to educate policy makers about the benefits of blending and braiding resources, and identify and draft regulatory changes that align resources to meet long-term support needs. At the local level, they will train Workforce Development professionals on the implementation of Group Discovery, Customized Employment and Self Employment as pathways to meaningful employment for individuals
across the spectrum of disability.

The work of the TASH Collaborative builds on ODEP identified best practices - Discovery, Customized Employment, and Self Employment - by working to align resources at the state level and enhancing the delivery approach at the local level, to be implemented within America’s Job Centers by America’s Job Center staff, mandated partners, and community-based organizations, toward the increased employment of individuals with disabilities.

To learn more about Discovery, Customized Employment, and Self Employment, visit [http://www.dol.gov/odep/](http://www.dol.gov/odep/).

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**LEAD PEOPLE Karen McCulloh - Project Director, LEAD Center**

LEAD Center Project Director Karen McCulloh understands firsthand the opportunities and challenges in the workforce development system for the disability community. A professional registered nurse (RN) specializing in neurosurgical intensive care who also worked in community health nursing, as a nurse executive and as a nurse entrepreneur, McCulloh was initially informed that she was being considered for sheltered employment after developing multiple disabilities before her first in-person meeting with her vocational rehabilitation counselor, an incident that made her question her own abilities, self-identity and her future employment opportunities asking, “Is this what it is like to become disabled in America? Is this what happens to the majority of people with disabilities trying to find employment?”

McCulloh’s personal experience spurred her in a new professional direction. Unable to find employment as a healthcare professional after becoming disabled, McCulloh became the first RN in the state of Illinois who has multiple disabilities to set up a for-profit practice while creating her own specialty in nursing, Community Health Disability Education. She also co-founded the National Organization of Nurses with Disabilities, NOND, [www.nond.org](http://www.nond.org) in 2003. Her leadership has extended into education, research, as a writer, grassroots program developer, organizer,
disability rights advocate and into national disability employment policy. She has worked for the past 23 years in the workforce development arena for and with people representing cross-disabilities and is known as a “leader who thinks outside of the box.” She has worked with local, state, national and global corporations focusing on CEO education. McCulloh’s work extends to the promotion of healthcare careers for qualified veterans and civilians with disabilities and to the development of supports and best practices for healthcare professionals who are mature workers that become disabled after licensure.

In 2005, McCulloh accepted the founding Executive Director position of disabilityworks, an initiative set up at the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce where she focused her work in the Northeast Region of Illinois on the employment of people with disabilities which then became statewide in 2007. In 2006, McCulloh accepted a Federal Appointment from the U.S. Secretary of the Department of Labor to the National Job Corps Advisory Committee and was appointed as the Chair of the Disability Subcommittee. She was the only person with a disability to serve on this advisory committee. Recommendations developed by the subcommittee were sent to the US Secretary of the Department of Labor during the Bush Administration.

In 2008, McCulloh resigned from the Federal Appointment in order to serve on President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden’s Transition Team in Washington, DC while she continued to work as the executive director of disabilityworks.

In 2010, she resigned as the executive director of disabilityworks in order to reestablish her own independent contracting business, Karen McCulloh & Associates Consulting. She received a Presidential Appointment from President Obama to the US AbilityOne Commission in 2011. In October 2012, McCulloh joined National Disability Institute as Project Director for the LEAD Center. Her passion is directed to the removal of barriers that keep people with disabilities from finding good jobs in integrated community settings and creating system change within the public workforce investment system. Karen is a graduate of Loyola University of Chicago and Grant Hospital School of Nursing in Columbus, Ohio.

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LEAD PARTNERS National Disability Institute

National Disability Institute (NDI), the lead organization in the LEAD Center collaborative, understands that employment is an important step in a bigger picture for people with
disabilities – financial stability and economic advancement.

In 2005, a small group of parents, family members, and individuals with disabilities joined with leading thinkers and practitioners in the disability and asset building communities to launch National Disability Institute (NDI). The unified vision for the new nonprofit corporation was to build together a better economic future for individuals with disabilities and their families.

Through public education, pioneering demonstrations, policy development, and customized training and technical assistance activities, NDI has become a recognized leader nationwide that continues to change thinking and behavior at an individual and systems level that individuals across the spectrum of significant disabilities can work, save, and advance their economic stability and self-sufficiency.

Today, NDI has a staff of 20, located across the country with a headquarters in DC, that is most recognized for harnessing the power of collaboration with government, financial institutions, the business community, community nonprofits, and institutions of higher education to advance new opportunities for work, income production, saving and asset building for people with disabilities.

NDI accomplishments include:

- **The Real Economic Impact Tour** has brought together more than 900 collaborating organizations in more than 100 cities nationwide to improve access to the Earned Income Tax Credit. In seven years, NDI has assisted more than 1.5 million low-income workers with disabilities access EITC and benefit from more than $1.4 billion in tax refunds as a first step toward planning a better economic future. The Tour has been supported for multiple years with funding from Bank of America, Walmart, AT&T, Acorda Therapeutics, the IRS, and the U.S. Department of Education.

- **The Disability Employment Initiative** is a unique partnership between the U.S. Department of Labor and NDI that is providing training and technical assistance to 23 state Workforce Investment systems to improve access and support to jobseekers with disabilities at a community level. NDI is the Technical Assistance contractor that provides monthly training events in addition to on-site technical assistance to improve integrated service delivery options.

- **The BEST Intern project** is a collaboration with the Kessler Foundation and the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, the Workforce Investment system and state VR agencies to place individuals with disabilities in varied jobs in credit unions in selected states that will help improve also the availability of affordable and accessible financial services and products.

- **Asset Development Summits** that have brought together the disability and asset building communities to plan and implement an action agenda in more than a dozen states with ongoing education and outreach activities.

- **BEST Alliance**, a customized financial education program for students with
intellectual and developmental disabilities that was piloted at the University of North Florida to teach understanding and skills development regarding budgeting, credit, and savings strategies that is now being adapted and replicated by other colleges and universities for students with and without disabilities to learn together.

With nearly 1 in 3 Americans with disabilities living in poverty – double the national average and among the highest poverty rate of any underserved population in America – National Disability Institute believes the economic advancement and stability of people with disabilities is one of the most important social issues of our time. Today, organizations and individuals can join NDI in its mission and work by joining its Real Economic Impact Network, a grassroots team dedicated to advancing economic self-sufficiency for all Americans with disabilities. To learn more, visit www.realeconomicimpact.org.

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