LEAD Center Establishes Community of Practice with NCIL to Promote Employment and Economic Advancement

The LEAD Center, in collaboration with the National Council for Independent Living (NCIL), established a community of practice (COP) on employment and economic advancement to provide peer-to-peer mentorship, training and technical assistance to Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and their local American Job Centers (AJCs). Ongoing trainings and discussions will support economic advancement for CIL and AJC customers seeking employment and engaged in the workforce. The goals for the community of practice are to:

- Create a sustainable forum to enable staff at CILs and AJCs to learn from each other and work collaboratively to improve the employment and economic advancement of customers with disabilities.
- Provide training and technical assistance to CIL and AJC staff to build their capacity to implement economic advancement strategies that remove barriers that keep people with
disabilities from getting and keeping jobs.

· Develop and disseminate guidance to educate and train job seekers and the people who support them at AJCs and CILs so that they can get support to become employed, retain employment, and become financially secure.

In March, the LEAD Center led the first discussion forum with the five CILs (Disability Rights and Resources in Birmingham, Ala.; IndependenceFirst in Milwaukee, Wisc.; Paraquad in St. Louis, Mo.; Montana Independent Living Project in Helena, Mont.; and Community Resources for Independent Living in Hayward, Calif.). The participating CILs collaborated with AJCs and the LEAD Center in a first-of-its-kind pilot project in 2013. The new COP builds on the progress and best practices learned from last year’s pilot to address challenges that create barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, which impede the financial stability of people with disabilities across both systems.

To complement the COP and build on best practices from last year’s CIL pilot project, the LEAD Center is preparing to release a toolkit in the next quarter that CILs and AJCs can utilize to facilitate closer partnerships and understanding that lead to better outcomes for jobseekers with disabilities.

To learn more about the COP, please contact Elizabeth Jennings, LEAD Center Assistant Project Director, ejennings@ndi-inc.org.

LEAD Center Releases Policy Roundtable Report

The LEAD Center recently released the report from its first bi-annual Policy Roundtable held July 17-18, 2013 in Washington, DC. LEAD Center policy roundtables work to bring together stakeholders – including federal agency leaders, state and local agency policymakers, practitioners and subject matter experts – to share knowledge and promote cross-system collaboration to advance individual and systems level change to promote employment and economic advancement for people with disabilities. The 2013 LEAD Center Policy Roundtable and corresponding report, both entitled “Making Collaboration Real,” focus on building a progressive vision to leverage resources effectively across various systems, agencies and organizations to promote employment and economic advancement of youth and adults with disabilities.

Read more about the LEAD Center Policy Roundtable and download the report, fact sheets and background paper here.

New Section 503 Rule Took Effect March 24, Expands Employment and
Economic Advancement Opportunities for People with Disabilities

U.S. Department of Labor data has consistently documented the significant gap between people with and without disabilities in employment and earnings. New federal regulations that became final this month offer thousands of individuals with disabilities new opportunities to climb the economic ladder and embark on a personal pathway to greater economic advancement and financial stability.

On March 24, the final rules for Section 503 issued by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) went into effect. Section 503 not only prohibits federal contractors and subcontractors from discriminating against individuals based on disability but also requires affirmative action on their part to increase the number of people with disabilities in their workforce. The new rule for the first time establishes a 7 percent goal for federal contractors in the hiring and retention of workers with disabilities. Although not a quota or a ceiling, the Section 503 final rule sets out new affirmative obligations on federal contractors to recruit, hire and promote qualified individuals with disabilities. Contractors will be required to maintain records that compare the number of individuals with disabilities who apply for jobs with the number of individuals who are actually hired. Records must also be kept on outreach and recruitment efforts, retention and career advancement. Contractors can invite job applicants to voluntarily self-identify as having a disability at a pre-offer stage of the hiring process or post job offer, which will help contractors meet their recruitment, hiring and career advancement goals.

What are the possibilities for the future? OFCCP estimates that an additional 600,000 workers with disabilities may be hired by federal contractors to help meet Section 503 obligations. The greatest concern expressed by federal contractors is in connecting with talented people with disabilities who meet their needs. This presents a wonderful opportunity for federal contractors, people with disabilities and people who provide workforce supports to develop creative ways to connect qualified job seekers with career opportunities.

To learn more about the final Section 503 rule and to access resources, visit www.dol.gov/ofccp/503rule.

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President Obama Signs Executive Order Including People with Disabilities in Minimum Wage Hike for Federal Contract Workers

February 12, 2014, marked a historic day in the economic advancement of all people with disabilities when President Obama signed an executive order raising the minimum wage for employees of federal contractors, including workers with disabilities, to $10.10/hour beginning on Jan. 1, 2015. Current law permits workers with disabilities to be paid less than minimum wage under certain specialized certificate programs such as Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act; the executive order extends $10.10/hour wage protections to all individuals, including
workers with disabilities, working under federal contracts (e.g., service, concessions, etc.). This executive order will be applied to all new and replacement federal contracts.

At a time when nearly 1 in 3 Americans with disabilities lives in poverty, among the highest poverty rate of any underserved population in America, the Obama Administration’s executive order gives federal contract workers with and without disabilities an opportunity to build more secure financial futures for themselves and their families and promote economic advancement. Learn more about the executive order in this fact sheet issued by the White House.

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**Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Release New Regulations on Home and Community-Based Settings**

On Jan. 10, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) released new regulations governing home and community-based services (HCBS) provided through state Medicaid programs. The regulations clarify that, in order to receive federal HCBS funding for services for people who are elderly and/or with disabilities, states must ensure that those services are tailored to each individual’s needs and provided in a setting that promotes community inclusion and services in the most integrated setting possible. States must ensure that HCBS recipients live in the setting of their choice, and that they have opportunities to seek employment and work in competitive integrated settings, engage in community life, and control personal resources. CMS also noted that HCBS services provided outside the home – such as supported employment services, job training or day programs – also must be provided in settings that promote community integration. CMS plans to issue additional guidance on those nonresidential settings that also qualify as “community-based” for the purposes of receiving HCBS funding. The rule went into effect on Mar. 17, 2014, and states have to submit transition plans to CMS related to how they plan to transition to services that meet the requirements laid out in the regulation.

Several tools and resources exist to help stakeholders get up to speed on the new regulations. On March 20, CMS released the Home and Community-Based Service (HCBS) 1915(c) Waiver and 1915(1) State Plan Amendment (SPA) Settings’ Requirements Compliance Toolkit. While it does not include tools for employment settings, this toolkit was developed to help stakeholders comply with the new requirements.

The LEAD Center also co-hosted two webinars on the new regulations with the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), CMS’s Disability and Elderly Public Health Group and Employment First. Both webinars and related handouts are available in their entirety through the LEAD Center webinar archives by clicking the links below:

- Innovative Strategies for Using Medicaid State Plan and Waiver Options to Promote Integrated Employment of People with Disabilities (Feb. 20, 2014)
- Implications of HCBS Final Rule on Non-Residential Settings – The Impact of New HCBS
Guidance on Employment & Day Services (Feb. 27, 2014)

Additional information on the new regulations is available at www.Medicaid.gov/HCBS.

LEAD Center Webinar Highlights Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

On February 26, the LEAD Center, in collaboration with ODEP and the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB) Office of Financial Empowerment, held the second webinar in the Promoting Economic Advancement Series, Integrating Employment and Financial Capability Services: New Pathways to Economic Stability. This webinar provided an overview of new resources and expertise CFPB brings to help jobseekers and workers, including persons with disabilities, increase their financial capability as they enter or advance in employment. ODEP and CFPB also discussed a new partnership between the agencies, through which they are working together to advance positive financial behaviors and greater economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.

CFPB's Office of Financial Empowerment is part of the Division of Consumer Education and Engagement. CFPB was created to help make financial products and services work for all Americans by ensuring transparency in the marketplace. This means that prices are straightforward, risks are visible, and consumers have access to the information they need to make informed financial decisions for themselves and their families. The Office of Financial Empowerment focuses on the unique challenges faced by low-income and economically vulnerable consumers — people, including people with disabilities, who often face significant barriers and deceptive practices that impede their ability to achieve employment and long-term economic stability.

Webinar attendees represented workforce professionals, policy makers, community-based services providers and individuals with disabilities from 35 states and the District of Columbia. This webinar attendance reflects a growing understanding of the need to integrate employment and financial capability services to ensure that individuals with disabilities are prepared for hiring practices that include credit checks. This also highlights the need for people to seek and secure positions that will meet their monthly financial needs, enable them to engage in short- and long-term savings opportunities (including emergency savings and retirement plans) and decrease financial stress that can interfere with productivity and success on the job.

Join the LEAD Center on April 23, 2014, from 3:00 - 4:30 p.m. ET for the first webinar in our Leadership/Public Policy series, Section 503: Connecting Jobseekers with Disabilities and Federal Contractors through the Workforce Development System.

You may also register for upcoming webinars on the LEAD Center webinar page and access any past webinars through the LEAD Center webinar archive.
Lisa Mills is currently working as a consultant to 13 states on various strategies for expanding integrated, competitive employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. In addition to acting as a subject matter expert (SME) for the LEAD Center, she is also a SME for the ODEP-funded Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP). Mills has worked in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities for 25 years. Her work on integrated employment spans the last 12 years, beginning with grassroots efforts as part of her role supporting the People First self-advocacy movement. Over the past nine years, she has worked extensively with state Medicaid and vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies on a broad range of systems change strategies to support the expansion of integrated competitive employment for youth and adults with disabilities.

In 2002, Mills developed one of the first truly self-directed career planning processes for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities. In 2006, Mills authored a widely read report, entitled Revitalizing Integrated Employment, which documented nationwide best and emerging practices to support increased participation by people with intellectual/developmental disabilities in integrated employment. From 2007-2008, she was lead staff to one state Medicaid agency’s broad-based taskforce on integrated employment, which led her to managing more than $1 million in systems change funding to implement a variety of innovative best practices that included a community rehabilitation program (CRP) organizational change initiative; an employment outcomes data system; a performance-based supported employment reimbursement model; and the first national example of successfully embedding Customized Employment services in the state VR and Medicaid long-term care systems. From 2009-2010, Mills was primary author of one state’s rewrite of its home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver employment service definitions. Her development of a revised definition of prevocational services informed the changes made by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in its information bulletin on employment released in September 2011.

Currently, Mills is a Ruderman Fellow and Senior Technical Advisor to the Coalition to Promote Self-Determination. She is also a board member and public policy chair for TASH. Mills believes passionately in respecting individuals with disabilities by having high expectations of the contributions they can make to our society. In the words of Nelson Mandela she quotes, “there is no passion in playing small...in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization run by and for Autistic people. ASAN is a national partner of the LEAD Center and ASAN President and Co-Founder Ari Ne‘eman serves as co-lead with National Disability Institute Executive Director
Michael Morris for the LEAD Center's Public Policy team. ASAN also works with the LEAD Center to create the monthly LEAD Center Employment, Health Care and Disability Policy Update.

ASAN’s supporters include Autistic adults and youth, cross-disability advocates, and non-autistic family members, professionals, educators and friends. ASAN was created to provide support and services to individuals on the autism spectrum while working to educate communities and improve public perceptions of autism. ASAN activities include public policy advocacy, community engagement to encourage inclusion and respect for neurodiversity, quality of life oriented research and the development of Autistic cultural activities. ASAN provides information about autism to the public through a number of different educational, outreach and systems change related projects.

ASAN also engages in direct collaborations with employers to support their recruitment of talent from within the Autistic community. For the last three years, ASAN has partnered with Freddie Mac, established by Congress in 1970 to provide liquidity, stability and affordability to the nation’s residential mortgage markets, to help them recruit recent graduates on the autism spectrum for paid internships within the company. The intent of these internships is to serve as an extended on-the-job interview for talented Autistic adults looking to enter Freddie Mac’s workplace. ASAN provides training and support to Freddie Mac hiring managers and supervisors as well as to recruited interns.

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement with regard to autism. Drawing on the principles of the cross-disability community, ASAN seeks to organize the community of Autistic adults and youth to have their voices heard in the national conversation about autism. ASAN believes that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which Autistic people enjoy the same access, rights and opportunities as all other citizens. ASAN hopes to empower Autistic people across the world to take control of their own lives and the future of our common community. Nothing About Us, Without Us!

For more information about ASAN, visit their website at autisticadvocacy.org

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