

# 2013 Commission Report



Presented to Governor Rick Scott  
August 15, 2013

**Employment**

**Opportunity**

**Independence**

Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities  
The Capitol  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

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## Executive Summary

From the beginning, Governor Rick Scott's top priority has been "ensuring that Floridians are able to gain employment." This priority encompasses all Floridians, including individuals with disabilities, who are able and willing to work. However, persons with disabilities are confronted by unique barriers that negatively impact their ability to compete in the workforce. These barriers also present lost opportunities for employers in this state, who are looking for skilled candidates to meet their immediate and future talent needs. In order to improve employment opportunities for this population, Governor Scott issued Executive Order 11-161 to create the Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities.

On July 26, 2012, the Commission presented its first report to Governor Scott, where it provided three recommendations to serve as initial steps to help level the playing field for persons with disabilities who are looking to work, assist employers in meeting their business needs, and promote private sector solutions to remedy the disconnect between these two groups. The Commission took a macro-economic approach to developing these recommendations to help the Governor set a vision for job creation for this population that various organizations (both within and outside of state government) can carry out.

The 2013 Commission Report builds upon the recommendations of the first report, and identifies ways state agencies and other organizations can implement these initiatives. The Commission provides five recommendations to improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities:

- 1. The Commission determined the state's disability system does not effectively connect employers to candidates with disabilities and inform them about the resources available to support these individuals in the workplace. The Commission recommends the Department of Economic Opportunity, along with the support of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, serve as a single-point of contact for employers that would: 1) assist them to access people with disabilities who are ready and able to work, for recruitment and hiring purposes; and 2) provide information on available services and supports that make it possible for persons with disabilities to succeed in the workforce. These responsibilities can be supported by the Employ Florida Marketplace web portal and the creation of a help desk administered by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation that would be responsible for assisting employers and responding to customers who request assistance. Such reform would make it easier for employers to recruit, hire and retain persons with disabilities in the workforce, and assist job-seekers in connecting with employers in their communities.**
- 2. The Commission believes the state could do more to effectively communicate with employers on how to find qualified individuals with**

disabilities to be a part of their workforce. To address the misperceptions and other barriers confronting persons with disabilities, the Commission recommends the creation of a coalition of state agencies to adopt a long-term joint agency communications plan. The plan must accomplish the following objectives: 1) increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities by motivating employers to hire; 2) promote a consistent message of awareness among employers about the value persons with disabilities bring to the workforce; and 3) inform employers about the resources that are available to assist their hiring needs, including the single-point of contact. The Commission recommends the coalition be formalized through a cooperative agreement among the agencies to ensure this is a long-term commitment for the state to speak with “one voice” and carry a consistent message to employers.

3. Pursuant to Executive Order 11-161, the Commission examined how opportunities for firsthand experiences in the workplace can improve employment readiness for students with disabilities prior to when they exit high school. The Commission finds that such experiences should be maximally available to students with disabilities and not just those individuals who have left the public education system. Requirements for the Special Diploma option offered to students with disabilities enrolled in Florida’s public education system should be revised along the same lines as recent reforms to the requirements for a Standard Diploma so that these students have similar guaranteed opportunities to “satisfy academic requirements in more hands-on, career-related ways.”<sup>1</sup> The Commission recommends the Florida Department of Education revise its requirements for the Special Diploma Option 1, so that all students receive credit in the following trilogy of career courses: Career Experiences, Career Preparation, and Career Placement.
4. The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides that students with disabilities at age 16 are entitled to receive a transition Individual Education Plan (IEP) to identify measurable post-secondary goals that will help prepare them for adult life. During this process, the school system is responsible for mobilizing a team of individuals and agencies that can assist the student in achieving those goals. However, there is much room to improve the participation of these agencies in the IEP process as students exit high school. The Commission recommends a workgroup develop a cooperative agreement among the Florida Department of Education and other state agencies to improve collaboration

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<sup>1</sup> Don Gaetz and Will Weatherford. “Gaetz, Weatherford column: Act makes education a path to jobs.” *Tampa Bay Times*. Tuesday, June 11, 2013. Available online at: <http://www.tampabay.com/opinion/columns/gaetz-weatherford-column-act-makes-education-a-path-to-jobs/2126014>

**between the school systems and agencies in assisting students with disabilities in achieving their post-secondary goals.**

- 5. Supported Employment is an evidence-based best practice and contributor to the long-term recovery of individuals with serious and persistent mental illnesses. Having a job facilitates increased self-sufficiency, mental wellness, and community integration. Currently, individuals served within the public mental health system have limited long-term supports available to help them maintain employment after obtaining a job. Many would benefit from Supported Employment services, but they are unavailable because there is no funding for a continuation of supportive services (also known as “follow-along”), once a successful job placement has occurred. As a result, many of these individuals lose their jobs and reenter the VR system or remain unemployed and dependent on public programs. The Commission recommends the state provide funding to support follow-along services for individuals with mental health disorders referred from the public mental health system to the VR system, to assist them in maintaining their employment after being placed in a job.**

These recommendations are intended to serve as critical steps to fulfill the vision Governor Rick Scott charged the Commission of improving employment opportunities for Floridians with disabilities. These strategies are designed to assist organizations, both within and outside of state government, to carry out these initiatives and create a business environment that is amenable to hiring persons with disabilities. Moving forward, the Commission intends to continue its mission in identifying additional public policy solutions that will tackle the barriers confronting these individuals in the workforce.

## The Role of the Commission

From the beginning, Governor Rick Scott's top priority has been "ensuring that Floridians are able to gain employment." This priority encompasses all Floridians, including individuals with disabilities, who are able and willing to work. However, there is a demonstrable disparity in employment for individuals with disabilities relative to the general population. The apparent lack of employment opportunities confronting these individuals is an outcome stemming from unique barriers, which negatively impact their ability to compete with others in the workforce. These barriers also present lost opportunities for employers in this state, who are looking for skilled candidates to meet their immediate and future talent needs. In order to improve employment opportunities for this population, Governor Scott issued Executive Order 11-161 to create the Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities.

The Commission has been charged with identifying the barriers and proposing solutions to improve employment outcomes for Floridians with disabilities. On July 26, 2012, the Commission presented its first report to Governor Scott, where it provided three recommendations to serve as initial steps to help level the playing field for persons with disabilities who are looking to work, assist employers in meeting their business needs, and promote private sector solutions to remedy the disconnect between these two groups. The Commission took a macro-economic approach to developing these recommendations to help the Governor set a vision for job creation for this population, where these initiatives can be carried out by various organizations, both within and outside of state government.

### **The Mission and Structure of the Commission**

Executive Order 11-161 outlines the mission and responsibilities of the Commission (see Appendix A). The vision of the Commission is to advance job and employment opportunities for Floridians with disabilities in order to help those individuals achieve greater independence. The mission of the Commission is to provide public policy solutions and strategies to the Governor and state policymakers. The Commission's responsibilities include: a) identifying and recommending strategies to cultivate job opportunities for Floridians with disabilities; b) identifying barriers in state and local programs that hinder individuals with disabilities from gaining employment, and proposing solutions to mitigate those barriers; and c) developing and leveraging state and community resources to advance service delivery.

### **Membership of the Commission**

Governor Scott appointed fourteen members to serve on the Commission. The membership consists of representatives of individuals with disabilities, employers in the state, the state college and university system, service provider organizations, and state agencies that serve persons with disabilities. The members include:

- Dr. Susanne Homant, President and CEO of The Able Trust, and appointed Chair of the Commission;
- Jack Felts, District Manager of Publix Supermarkets, Inc., and elected Vice-Chair of the Commission;
- Ellyn Drotzer, Associate Vice President of Resource Development and Strategic Planning at Broward College;
- Suzanne “Suzy” Hutcheson, President and CEO of Helping People Succeed;
- Jordan Knab, Faculty and Principal Investor for the Florida Consortium on Postsecondary Education and Intellectual Disabilities at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, and Founding Dean for the Dan Marino Foundation Campus;
- Scot LaFerte’, Vice President of Human Resources of Universal Orlando;
- James “Jim” Landsberg, Equal Opportunity Officer of the Department of Economic Opportunity;
- Robert Lynn, father of a child with a disability;
- Aleisa McKinlay, Director of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation;
- Russell Otway, representing wounded veterans;
- Barbara Palmer, Director of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities;
- Julio Suárez, Director of Diversity Outreach of Darden Restaurants;
- Marvin Tanck, President and CEO of Gulfstream Goodwill Industries; and
- David Darm, appointed Executive Director of the Commission.

It should be noted that all the members of the Commission serve on a volunteer basis, and most of the members attended meetings at their own expense.

### Commission Subcommittees

The Commission is divided into three subcommittees to address the charges outlined in Executive Order 11-161. Each subcommittee was tasked with gathering information on a particular issue and recommending strategies to include in the Commission Report. The subcommittees include:

- **Access to Employment Opportunities** – The committee is responsible for developing strategies to improve access to job opportunities for persons with disabilities by **bridging the needs of the employer and the individual**.
- **Employer Outreach** – The committee is responsible for developing strategies that promote awareness among employers to improve their willingness to hire persons with disabilities by **addressing the needs and concerns of the employer**.
- **Employment Readiness and Services** – The committee is responsible for identifying the supports and services that help persons with disabilities become better employees and more competitive in the job market by **focusing on the needs of the individual**.

The Commission conducted the bulk of its work through these subcommittees. The subcommittees convened through a series of telephone conferences and periodically presented findings and recommendations to the full Commission. Their work products are discussed in the “Commission Work Plan for 2013” section in this report.

### Commission Business Meetings and Employer Input

The Commission made an effort to hold its business meetings in metropolitan cities around the state to seek the input from employers within those communities. Since January 2012, the Commission has facilitated discussions in Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Orlando, Boca Raton, St. Petersburg, and Pensacola to learn about employers’ experiences with hiring or working with persons with disabilities, and to identify issues that may discourage them from considering these candidates. These discussions were designed to help the Commission develop strategies to effectively address both the needs of employers and job-seekers with disabilities. This input was incorporated into the recommendations and conclusions of this report.

### **The 2012 Recommendations**

The Commission took a macro-economic approach to developing recommendations for its first report to help the Governor set a vision for job creation for persons with disabilities that various organizations (both within and outside of state government) can carry out. The Commission identified three strategies to begin the processes of helping these individuals better compete in Florida’s workforce and assisting employers to meet their business needs:

1. The Commission determined the state’s disability employment system is not conducive for employers to find qualified candidates and learn about the services and supports available to their employees with disabilities. The Commission recommended the state streamline information and identify a single-point of contact to assist employers to navigate this system and expand their pool of candidates.
2. The Commission believes the state could do more to effectively communicate with employers on how to go about finding qualified individuals with disabilities to be a part of their workforce. The Commission recommended the state develop a long-term communications strategy that will: 1) promote a consistent message of awareness among employers about the value persons with disabilities bring to the workforce, and 2) inform employers about the resources that are available to assist their hiring needs.
3. The Commission determined persons with disabilities need to be given as many firsthand work experiences to better compete in the workforce and improve perceptions among employers. The Commission recommended state

policymakers, business leaders, and community partners promote internship and work experience opportunities for persons with disabilities.

## Commission Work Plan for 2013

This year, the Commission developed a strategic work plan to assist in furthering the recommendations in the 2012 Report. The work plan served as a foundation for the Commission to develop recommendations for this report, as well as help build partnerships with state organizations and employers interested in carrying out these initiatives.

The work plan helped the Commission accomplish the following tasks: 1) develop a process map of the disability employment system to streamline information and identify a single-point of contact for employers; 2) identify strategies to develop and implement a long-term communications plan that will promote awareness among employers to hire persons with disabilities; and 3) examine ways to improve employment readiness for students with disabilities to assist them in transitioning from school to work. The Commission assigned each task to its three subcommittees to gather information on these issues and partner with various agencies and organizations to develop strategies to implement these initiatives.

### **Process Map of the Disability Employment System**

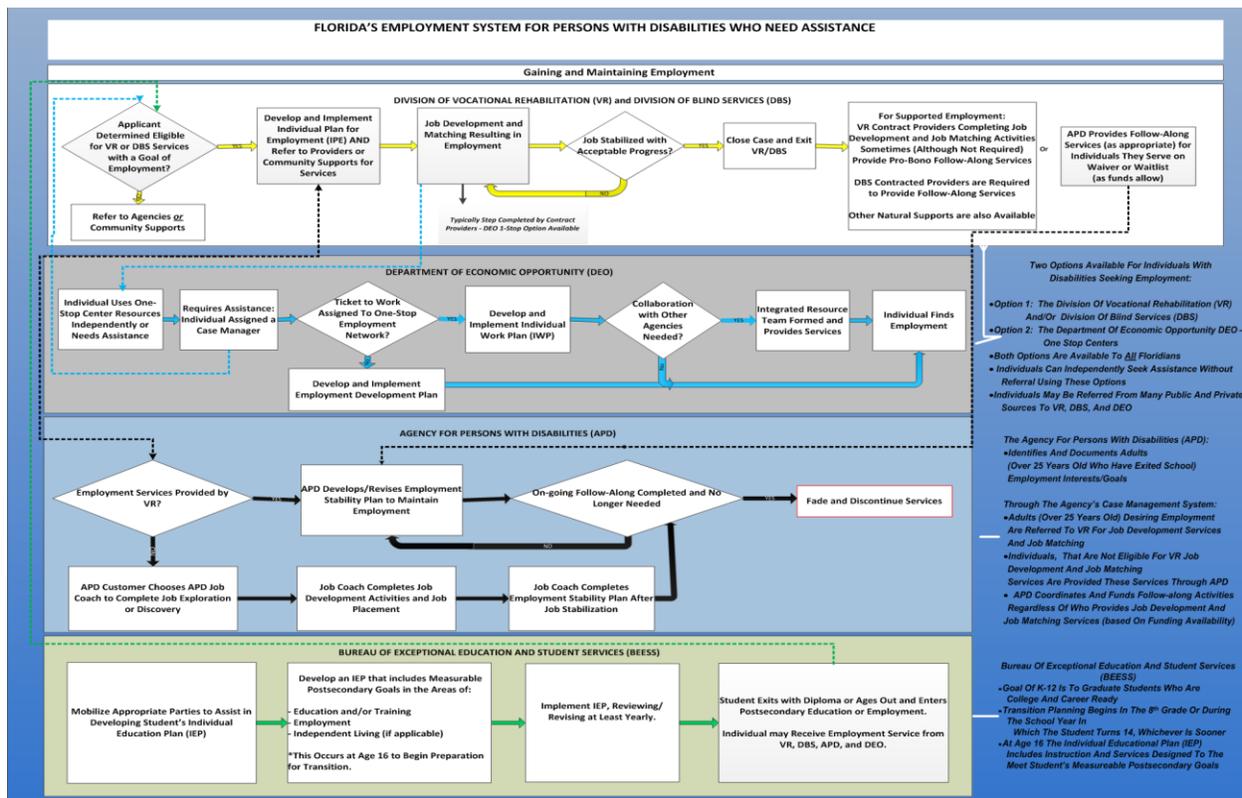
The Access to Employment Opportunities Subcommittee partnered with several state agencies to develop a map that illustrates the various processes and resources available for Floridians with disabilities seeking employment (see Appendix C for the full size map). The map was designed to help the Commission and these agencies find ways to streamline information, reduce potential barriers within these processes, and identify a single-point of contact within the disability employment system to better connect job-seekers and employers.

### **Map Summary and Systems Overview**

The subcommittee facilitated a series of discussions with content experts from several agencies to gather information about the services and supports available to assist persons with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. This information helped the Commission develop a map that provides a comprehensive overview of the processes an individual could go through to access these services. The state agencies that are represented on the map include:

- The Department of Education-Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) – This is the primary entity that provides employment development and job matching services to persons with disabilities, regardless of the type of disability.
- The Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) – The department oversees the state's workforce system, which also provides job development and matching activities through the one-stop career centers.

- The Department of Education-Division of Blind Services (DBS)<sup>2</sup> – This entity provides a myriad of services to individuals who are blind or visually impaired, including vocational rehabilitation services.
- The Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) – This is the agency that provides home and community-based services to individuals with developmental disabilities, primarily through a Medicaid waiver program.
- The Department of Education-Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) – The bureau assists the 67 school districts in providing preparatory activities to help students with disabilities successfully transition from school to work.<sup>3</sup>



The processes illustrated on this map are designed to help individuals with disabilities achieve their employment goals; however, not every person with a disability uses (or needs) these services to obtain employment. Individuals can either access these services directly or be referred by another entity (such as a medical professional). The

<sup>2</sup> DBS is not represented on the map because its process is identical to VR. They have the same federal partner, the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

<sup>3</sup> Due to a limitation of space, the map does not capture the other public and private agencies that also provide employment-related services to persons with disabilities. However, a number of these organizations are under contract with the state agencies represented on the map to provide such services to clients.

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the DEO one-stop career centers are the primary agencies responsible for providing employment development and job matching services. An individual is eligible to receive VR services if: 1) the person has a documented disability that presents barriers to getting or keeping a job; 2) the person wants to work; and 3) the person can benefit from services and supports provided by VR. Once VR deems an individual eligible to receive services, a VR counselor develops an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) to assist the person in finding and obtaining a job. The one-stop career centers provide similar job development services, and job-seekers can either receive an Individual Work Plan (through Social Security) or Employment Development Plan to assist them in finding employment. These resources are available to both persons with and without disabilities, and many VR offices are collocated with the one-stop career centers.

VR closes its case after the individual has been successfully placed in a job and maintained stability for a specified period of time. Once this occurs, it is up to the other agencies to provide any additional support needed to help the person maintain employment (also known as “follow-along” activities). Some individuals do not need additional support. Others may only need to rely on natural supports in a workplace to assist them on the job (such as assistive technology, reasonable accommodations, etc.). However, some individuals will need on-going support to maintain employment, due to the severity of their disability. This is called “Supported Employment” services. For individuals with developmental disabilities who are eligible to receive APD services, the agency will develop an Employment Stability Plan to coordinate these follow-along services. VR cannot, by federal law, provide follow-along services and may not open a Supported Employment case unless there is a “reasonable expectation” that follow-along services will be available when VR closes its case. All entities serving a customer with complex needs must plan together in the beginning to identify how follow-along services will occur, prior to the individual being placed on a job, to ensure successful employment.

For students with disabilities preparing to graduate from high school, school systems are required to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to assist them in obtaining their post-secondary (education and employment) goals. This process is further discussed in the “Transition Process for Students with Disabilities” section.

## Findings

The Commission identified several issues across these processes that prevent the agencies from effectively serving individuals with disabilities who seek employment. It must be emphasized that these are *systemic* problems (not the fault of one particular agency), and will require collaboration among all the agencies to improve these processes. The Commission identified the following barriers within these processes:

1. **There is a lack of collaboration among the agencies during the development of the employment plans** – Each agency is responsible for developing a plan that will assist individuals in employment development, job

matching, job stability (follow-along services), and job promotion activities. However, the process does not require communication or collaboration among the agencies, divisions, and departments to coordinate the development of these plans. This is particularly problematic for individuals who must transition from one system to another (known as an agency “handoff”) to achieve their employment goals (such as a student who transitions from high school to the workforce system). Furthermore, there is a lack of accountability measures in place to ensure that collaboration does occur among these agencies.

2. **There are inconsistent resources geographically across the state to provide employment services** – Though state agencies may support employment development and job matching activities for persons with disabilities, most of these services are provided at the local level. The availability of these resources depends on the local commitment of the agencies within each community (i.e., school district, workforce region, etc.). In some cases, there is little to no collaboration among the local agencies to coordinate these efforts. This problem is especially evident with the availability of follow-along services for individuals with mental health disorders. Currently, there is no state funding dedicated to support follow-along activities for individuals with mental health disorders, once placed on a job. As a result, VR must rely on the willingness and ability of local agencies (such as community mental health providers) to support such activities. This inconsistency creates challenges for VR and other agencies that serve clients seeking employment, and presents significant barriers to the successful employment of people with mental health disorders (Recommendation 5 addresses this issue further).
3. **There are statewide training deficiencies, and new approaches are needed to assist agencies in providing job matching and employment development services** – This is a two-fold problem. On the job-matching side, disability service agencies and provider organizations are not consistently trained on how to approach employers about potential candidates with disabilities. Some of these agencies focus more on the individual’s disability, rather than the talent and skills the individual brings to the job. This could have the unintended effect of perpetuating the ambivalence among some employers to hire persons with disabilities (see “Long-Term Joint Agency Communications Plan” section). On the employment development side, there is an inconsistent knowledge base across agencies (particularly within the DEO one-stop career centers) about how to serve the specialized needs of individuals with disabilities in the workforce. This can create gaps or delays in the employment development process, where individuals are not referred to the agency that can best assist with their needs.
4. **There is a lack of data sharing among the agencies, resulting in lapses in accountability** – Many of these processes do not require (or request) data from other agencies or organizations when an individual is referred. For example, eligibility determination documentation sent to VR (by an individual or through a referral) can often be incomplete, require repeat assessment, and may result in

delays for the individual to receive services or an inaccurate eligibility determination, due to the lack of information. For students with disabilities preparing to exit high school, agencies do not request (or receive) contact information from schools, and schools are only required to send agencies an invitation to participate in an IEP meeting. It can be difficult for agencies to attend, due to workload issues and time constraints, resulting in a lost opportunity to connect with students and their families. For APD, there is an undefined process at the local level for employment specialists to make appropriate referrals with required documentation to VR. The referrals are often not completed, and some clients are not even being referred.

5. **There is a lack of process direction for agency “handoffs”** – Several of these processes require more than one agency to assist individuals in obtaining their employment goals. However, these processes do not prompt the other agencies to take on the individual, resulting in a delay in obtaining services. This is especially evident with students exiting high school who are not aware of the available services (such as through VR) that can assist them in reaching their post-secondary goals. In regards to APD clients, if an individual is not deemed to be able to benefit from VR services (meaning nothing VR can provide would result in an employment outcome), there is no “trigger” in place within the APD process to re-refer the individual to VR, if and when the situation changes.

These findings assisted the Commission in developing recommendations that will help reduce the barriers within these processes and improve collaboration among the agencies.

#### Single-Point of Contact within the Disability Employment System

The Commission determined the disability employment system does not effectively connect employers to candidates with disabilities and inform them about the resources available to support these individuals in the workplace. A designated single-point of contact within this system would help employers to better recruit, hire and retain persons with disabilities in the workforce, and assist job-seekers in connecting with employers in their communities. As the primary state entities responsible for providing employment development and job matching activities, the Commission believes the Department of Economic Opportunity, along with the support of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, should serve as the single-point of contact for employers and job-seekers with disabilities.

The Department of Economic Opportunity is the most appropriate point of contact for employers because employers are the department’s primary customers. The department is responsible for assisting the Governor “in working with the Legislature, state agencies, business leaders, and economic development professionals to formulate and implement coherent and consistent policies and strategies designed to promote economic opportunities for all Floridians.”<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this purpose, DEO is

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<sup>4</sup> Section 20.60(4), F.S.

charged with facilitating economic and workforce development projects that will create, expand, or retain businesses in the state. The Commission believes it falls within the mission of DEO to assist employers in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities who are ready and able to work. The department is already in the process of developing a web portal to assist job-seekers with disabilities in connecting with employers in their communities. Furthermore, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation can support DEO in providing information to employers and job-seekers on available services and supports that make it possible for persons with disabilities to succeed in the workforce.

The Commission's first recommendation in this report addresses this issue further. The Commission has worked closely with the Department of Economic Opportunity, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities in developing this recommendation.

### **Long-Term Joint Agency Communications Plan**

Persons with disabilities are confronted by unique barriers negatively impacting their ability to compete for jobs, and many of these barriers relate to employers' misperceptions of their limitations to perform the duties of the job. In its 2012 Report, the Commission recommended the state develop a long-term communications plan that would improve perceptions among employers by: 1) promoting a consistent message about the skills persons with disabilities bring to the workforce, and 2) informing employers about the resources that are available to assist their hiring needs.

Shortly after this recommendation was made, several state agencies and other organizations formed an employment coalition to develop a long-term communications plan. The Employer Outreach Subcommittee assisted the coalition to identify related perceptions and concerns among employers, develop strategies to improve those perceptions, and promote messages that would resonate with employers.

### **Employer Perceptions**

The Commission made an effort to identify major misperceptions and concerns preventing employers from hiring persons with disabilities. The Able Trust conducted a study in 2011 that identified key factors employers consider when recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and retaining people with disabilities. Researchers conducted a 78-question survey with decision-makers in Florida companies (i.e., chairmen, CEOs, managers, etc.). Survey participants were asked questions about their perceptions of how various factors pose a barrier to the employment of persons with disabilities (see table below). The majority of the barriers identified by the study qualify as misperceptions about the limitations of persons with disabilities.

| <b>Perceptions of Barriers to Hiring Persons with Disabilities (PWD)</b>  |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <b>Potential Barrier</b>  | <b>Mean Score*</b> |
| Employees with Disabilities have physical and/or stamina restrictions on their assigned job duties  | 3.000              |
| There are health and safety concerns with hiring PWDs in this organization  | 2.957              |
| Cost increases attributable to extending health, life, and/or disability coverage are too high  | 2.936              |
| Type of work in this organization is unsuitable for PWDs  | 2.894              |
| Organization lacks access/facilities/equipment suitable for PWDs  | 2.823              |
| Cost of accommodations for PWDs is too high   | 2.816              |
| PWDs lack the specific job-related experience required of job applicants for this organization  | 2.766              |
| Employees with disabilities require additional management and supervisory time  | 2.752              |
| Cost of training PWDs is too high   | 2.738              |
| Employees with disabilities lack the ability to travel for work   | 2.638              |
| PWDs lack the requisite skills and training of job applicants for this organization   | 2.631              |
| Employees with disabilities lack the ability to work under great time pressure and stress   | 2.624              |
| Employees with disabilities create additional workload for the HR staff   | 2.596              |
| Employees with disabilities tend to be less productive  | 2.454              |
| Organization is concerned about potential negative reactions from clients and customers   | 2.390              |
| Employees with disabilities tend to have poor attendance and punctuality records  | 2.348              |
| Staff may feel uncomfortable if asked to work with a PWD  | 2.298              |
| <b>*Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “strongly agree”) to rate their perception of each of these barriers. The results show an average score per barrier sorted from high to low.</b> |                    |
| <i>Source: FSU Professors Born, Patty and Randy Dumm. “Key Factors that Assist Employers to Recruit, Interview, Hire and Retain People with Disabilities.” Commissioned by The Able Trust, June 2011. p.8</i>   |                    |

Every economic transaction in a free market, including the hiring of an individual for a job, is designed to be a “win-win” scenario for both sides. In this sense, barriers to employment confronting persons with disabilities represent lost opportunities for employers, as well. This year, the Commission reached out to employers around the state to learn about their experiences in hiring persons with disabilities and identify strategies that can assist them with expanding their pool of talent. The Commission gathered this feedback through two methods: 1) solicited employers to participate in public meetings around the state: and 2) developed a questionnaire to assist its members and partners in gathering input through personal interviews with employers in their communities (see Appendix B for the questionnaire). Below is a summary of the feedback the Commission received from approximately 25 participating businesses:

- A common response of why employers are hesitant to hire persons with disabilities is the “fear of the unknown” (i.e., the decision could bring additional cost or risk to the employer).
- Liability was cited as a major concern among employers, particularly when it relates to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Other concerns cited included: a lack of ability to perform the essential functions of the job; additional costs (both financial and human resources) on the business; and concern of fairness.
- Most participants recommended education and information (not regulation) as solutions to improving perceptions among employers. Many employers seek information about business practices and job candidates through colleges and

universities, workforce boards, and trade organizations – these are useful resources to bring about awareness of the opportunities persons with disabilities bring to the workforce.

- Employers who indicated they work with agencies and organizations serving persons with disabilities cited the importance of responsiveness and making the hiring process “easier.” These were also characterized as important attributes to a single-point of contact.

This information helped the Commission to identify strategies that would dispel these misperceptions and alleviate some of the concerns among employers.

### Inter-Agency Employment Coalition

Shortly after the Commission published its first report, several state agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and other stakeholders formed a coalition to develop strategies to address the barriers confronting persons with disabilities in the workforce. One of those strategies included developing a joint agency communications plan that would incorporate the recommendations in the 2012 Report. The Employer Outreach Subcommittee worked with the coalition to assist in developing this plan. Members of the coalition included communication experts, job developers, disability advocates, and individuals representing employers. The coalition identified strategies based on the feedback the Commission received from employers and an examination of current and past communications efforts to promote persons with disabilities in the workforce. The coalition identified messages that would resonate with employers, tools to deliver those messages to a large employer audience, and measures to ensure these efforts are successfully reaching employers.

As the coalition continues to identify strategies to develop a long-term joint agency communications plan, the Commission recommends the state formalize this group through a cooperative agreement to ensure a sustainable commitment and that related efforts are coordinated among the state agencies (see Recommendation 2).

### **Strategies to Improve Employment Readiness for Students with Disabilities**

Executive Order 11-161 charges the Commission to develop strategies that will “create a seamless transition between education and employment” for students with disabilities. For the general population, readiness to enter the workforce is commonly seen to be reflective of academic preparation. The Commission examined the extent to which the disparity in employment opportunities may reflect a disparity in educational opportunities between persons with disabilities and the general student population. In addition to the need to promote work experience opportunities (such as internships), individuals with disabilities must be adequately prepared with relevant skills in order to better compete in the workforce. Employers are increasingly looking for higher skilled candidates to meet their immediate and future talent needs. To fulfill this responsibility, the Employment Readiness and Services Subcommittee focused on students ages 16 to 22

who are exiting the high school system, and identified programs and strategies that can improve employment readiness and the transition process as they enter the workforce.

### The Transition Process for Students with Disabilities

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities who qualify for special education services are entitled to receive an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to assist them in achieving their educational goals.<sup>5</sup> The IEP should be tailored to the student's needs and assist teachers and other service providers in helping the student reach those goals. When a student turns 16 years old, the IDEA requires the school system to help the individual identify measurable post-secondary goals and develop a plan to assist the student in experiencing a successful transition.<sup>6</sup> "Transition" refers to the activities that prepare a student for adult life, including post-secondary education, employment, and independent living (if applicable). Thus, the transition IEP is designed to provide an exploratory path to assist students in reaching their employment and post-secondary education goals.

The school district is responsible for mobilizing a team of individuals and agencies to help the student develop a transition IEP. The team usually consists of: the student, the parent or guardian, a general education teacher (if the student participates in a regular education environment), a special education teacher or service provider, a school district representative, and other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise of the student. The IEP team is also required to identify and invite representatives from agencies that may provide or pay for transition services (such as on-the-job training, post-school adult living, etc.) to participate in this process, with the consent of the parent or student (if he or she is 18 years of age or older). Once the transition IEP is developed, the plan is implemented, and the team is required to update it at least once a year until the student exits high school. The IDEA provides that students with disabilities are entitled to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) until the age of 22, or until they receive a Standard Diploma, whichever comes first.

### Barriers within the Transition Process

The transition IEP process was designed to improve the graduation levels for students with disabilities and prepare them for adult life. Although the state has made great strides to improving the graduation rate of students with disabilities, there are several barriers within the transition process that prevent these students from experiencing a seamless transition into the workforce. Again, these are process problems, and should not be seen as the fault of the school system or agencies. The Commission identified the following barriers:

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<sup>5</sup> 34 C.F.R. 300.320

<sup>6</sup> 20 U.S.C. §1400(d)(1) A

- **There is an inconsistency in organization participation in the planning and development of the transition IEP, resulting in a lack of collaboration** – There is a lack of a clear, consistent process at the local school level to promote increased participation of state agencies and other organizations in the IEP development. Though schools are required to invite representatives from these organizations to participate in an IEP meeting, it can be difficult for these individuals to attend, due to workload issues and time constraints (some IEP meetings can last eight hours). Furthermore, the process does not promote contact between students exiting the school system and agencies that might help them transition to the workplace. This can result in a lost opportunity for students to be aware of the available resources that could support them in their post-secondary goals.
- **The process does not define the point when agencies should contact the student** – Currently, the process does not prompt agencies when a student is exiting high school. This is due to the fact that some students remain in the school system until the age of 22. This results in a delay for some students to obtain services from these agencies.
- **There is a lack of accountability (at the state level) to ensure collaboration occurs** – The state could provide better guidance to schools and agencies in collaborating with each other during the development of the transition IEP. For example, there are cases where the student's post-secondary goals outlined by the transition IEP do not align with the employment objectives outlined by Individual Plan for Employment (developed by VR). This demonstrates that there is a disconnect between certain school systems and agencies that could be remedied by the state.

The Commission provides two recommendations in this report to improve employment readiness and help students with disabilities through the transition process (see Recommendations 3 and 4).

## **Recommendation 1: Create a Single-Point of Contact for Employers**

**The Commission determined the state’s disability system does not effectively connect employers to candidates with disabilities and inform them about the resources available to support these individuals in the workplace. The Commission recommends the Department of Economic Opportunity, along with the support of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, serve as a single-point of contact for employers that would: 1) assist them to access people with disabilities who are ready and able to work, for recruitment and hiring purposes; and 2) provide information on available services and supports that make it possible for persons with disabilities to succeed in the workforce. These responsibilities can be supported by the Employ Florida Marketplace web portal and the creation of a help desk administered by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation that would be responsible for assisting employers and responding to customers who request assistance. Such reform would make it easier for employers to recruit, hire and retain persons with disabilities in the workforce, and assist job-seekers in connecting with employers in their communities.**

Employers interested in hiring or actively recruiting a person with a disability into their organization report having been overwhelmed by the amount of information, provider organizations, and resources within the disability employment system. Employers do not have a centralized or single-point of contact within state government to whom they can turn to learn about the supports and assistive services (assistive technology, transportation, etc.) that might be available for their employees. It is unrealistic to expect employers to commit the time and resources to learn and navigate the intricacies of state government systems in order to find qualified candidates and address reasonable accommodations for their employees. Therefore, the Commission recommends the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO), along with the support of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), serve as a single-point of contact to assist employers in finding these resources and services in order to help them recruit, hire, and retain persons with disabilities in the workforce.

### **The Role and Responsibilities of the Single-Point of Contact**

The single-point of contact should serve two roles: 1) assist employers to access people with disabilities who are ready and able to work, for recruitment and hiring purposes; and 2) provide information on available services and supports that make it possible for persons with disabilities to succeed in the workforce. These roles can be supported by the Employ Florida Marketplace web portal and the creation of a help desk responsible for assisting employers and responding to customers who request assistance. The web portal is currently being developed by the Department of Economic Opportunity. However, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation will need three (3) positions to

support the functions of the help desk and accomplish the purpose of this recommendation.

### The “Ability Works” Portal

The Employ Florida Marketplace (EFM) website is an online tool designed to assist job-seekers and students to search for jobs in their communities, and to help employers identify potential job candidates. The site serves as a hub for the state's workforce services, while focusing on job openings and job candidates. The site is also a resource for policymakers, researchers, and others seeking to explore and analyze local labor markets in Florida. The EFM site provides data on job openings, career exploration, employer information, education and labor market research information. Job-seekers, students and employers can use this data to make informed decisions on careers, training, wages, occupation searches and resource recruitment.<sup>7</sup>

The Department of Economic Opportunity is currently developing the “Ability Works” portal within the EFM site to assist job-seekers with disabilities and employers in meeting their respective employment goals. Similar to the “Employ Florida Vets” portal, “Ability Works” would serve three primary functions: 1) provide job-seekers with disabilities the opportunity to search for job openings in their communities and find resources to assist them on the job; 2) assist employers in searching for information about job candidates with disabilities, along with available services and supports that will help them succeed on the job; and 3) connect customers to the workforce one-stop career centers. The Commission is partnering with DEO to gather input from employers, persons with disabilities, and other stakeholders to assist in the development of this portal.

The Commission recommends the “Ability Works” portal within the Employ Florida Marketplace serve as the primary web-based resource to assist employers interested in recruiting and hiring persons with disabilities. The portal should prioritize information that employers would need to find qualified candidates, such as resumes, job skills, work experience, etc. In regards to supports and services, such information should include (but not be limited to): information on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), “reasonable” accommodations, assistive technology resources, transportation services available within the community, job coaching and workforce training resources, veteran support services, and internship and work experience programs. Similar to what is offered on the “Employ Florida Vets” portal, “Ability Works” should provide a toll free number to a help desk that can further assist employers in navigating the site and finding information about hiring persons with disabilities (see section below). Once the web portal is created, agencies and organizations that serve job-seekers with disabilities can use this resource as a tool to assist their clients in connecting with employers in their community.

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<sup>7</sup> see [www.employflorida.com](http://www.employflorida.com)

The Commission will continue to work with DEO and partner with other agencies to develop the “Ability Works” portal. No additional funding is needed to support the development of the portal. However, the functions of the web portal identified above will not be as effective without the creation of a help desk to further assist employers in navigating the disability system to find job candidates ready and able to work.

### The Help Desk

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the “Ability Works” portal, the Commission recommends that the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation administer a help desk (similar to what is offered to support other portions of the EFM website) that can assist customers in navigating the portal and provide relevant information to help them reach their employment goals. The help desk must be staffed by experienced individuals who are familiar with the disability employment system, to either answer inquiries or connect employers and job-seekers to the agency that can best assist with their needs. The help desk should include (but not be limited to) the following responsibilities:

- Assist customers (both job-seekers and employers) in entering information into the EFM portal (e.g., registration information, resumes, job descriptions, etc.) and searching for job openings and qualified candidates in the database;
- Provide information on disability-related issues (as identified in the above section) that can help employers make informed hiring decisions; and
- Serve as a referral service to the state’s employment and workforce resources, such as the Department of Education’s (DOE) Divisions of Blind Services or Vocational Rehabilitation or local one-stop career centers, to better connect job-seekers and employers.

Though DEO is developing the “Ability Works” portal, VR will need additional resources in order to fulfill the responsibilities of the help desk outlined above. Absent the three (3) FTEs requested to set up the help desk, the web portal will be established with a customary help desk number available on the site, but it will not be as effective. The following section provides some of the resources and attributes needed to ensure the single-point of contact can fulfill these roles and responsibilities.

### **Resources and Attributes Necessary to Support the Help Desk and Web Portal**

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is requesting a budget of \$303,381 to administer the help desk. This request includes three salaried (FTE) positions to serve as help desk staff. These must be experienced individuals who are familiar with the disability employment system, as well as other disability resources, in order to effectively answer inquiries or properly connect customers with the appropriate agency. Furthermore, help desk staff should understand the general needs of employers and provide a quick turnaround time in responding to their inquiries. The budget request also includes funding for information technology (IT) services to develop a tracking system that will help catalog inquiries, usage, resolutions and outcomes. The data from the tracking system will be used for reporting purposes and program improvement. VR will

also need to coordinate with DEO and the workforce regions to ensure the one-stop career centers are equipped to serve new customers referred by the help desk. Subject to the Governor and Legislature's approval, the budget for the help desk would take effect July 1, 2014.

Entities that should assist VR and DEO in preparing to administer the help desk and "Ability Works" portal include, but are not limited to: the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Mental Health Program within the Department of Children and Families, the DOE Division of Blind Services, and the DOE Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services. Additional public and private entities may assist, as needs are identified. The agencies should help VR and DEO catalog and update information on services and resources available to support persons with disabilities on a job. The agencies should assist in training help desk staff to understand their respective services and provide appropriate contact information to assist in the referral process. Once the help desk and web portal are established, state agencies and their contracted vendors should inform clients of these resources and offer to assist in programming information, as needed. Agencies can also assist in marketing this resource to the business community (see Recommendation 2).

### **Implementation Strategy**

During the coming months, the Commission will work with these agencies to establish the single-point of contact within the disability employment system. The Commission will continue to identify the resources needed to support DEO and VR in effectively serving employers and job-seekers with disabilities. The single-point of contact can be implemented in five phases:

- **Phase 1: Identify Resources Needed to Support the Help Desk and Web Portal** – The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation has put forth a Legislative Budget Request (LBR) outlining the resources it will need to administer the help desk. As this request is being considered by state policymakers, the Department of Economic Opportunity should also assess its infrastructure to ensure the one-stop career staff are equipped to serve new customers that would be referred by the help desk. Additionally, the Commission and state agencies will examine ways the various systems can coordinate with each other to support the portal, such as whether and how the EFM database can intersect with VR's database. The agencies can also identify information resources that should be incorporated into the web portal, such as the Agency for Persons with Disabilities Resource Directory. The Commission can assist the agencies in identifying benchmarks and employment outcomes for the state to administer this entity.
- **Phase 2: Gather Employer and other Stakeholder Input** – Once VR, DEO and the other agencies acquire the resources needed to administer the single-point of contact, the Commission and its partners will identify stakeholders who will benefit from this resource. The Commission will solicit these stakeholders to participate in a series of meetings to gather business requirements and feedback to determine

whether the single-point of contact is a user-friendly resource and a valuable tool for job-seekers and employers.

- Phase 3: Launch the Web Portal and Help Desk – The Commission and agency partners will assist DEO and VR in administering the single-point of contact to ensure it is adequately resourced for implementation. The Commission will work with state agencies and other organizations to provide information and expertise needed for the single-point of contact to effectively respond to employers and job-seekers. The Commission and its partners will also work with DEO to coordinate with one-stop career centers and other local agencies to ensure this information is used at the community level.
- Phase 4: Execute Strategies to Market the Resource – As the single-point of contact is being developed, the Commission and its partners will develop strategies to market this resource to employers, job-seekers, and other organizations that would benefit. These strategies should be incorporated into the long-term joint agency communications plan discussed in Recommendation 2. Once the single-point of contact is established, the agencies and organizations can execute these marketing strategies to ensure employers and job-seekers are aware of this resource.
- Phase 5: Ensure Success – the Commission will continually work with DEO, VR, and the other agencies to ensure the single-point of contact is effectively connecting job-seekers and employers. The Commission will provide updates and further recommendations to the Governor’s Office on ways to improve and advance this resource.

## **Recommendation 2: Create a Coalition of Agencies to Adopt a Long-Term Communications Plan**

**The Commission believes the state could do more to effectively communicate with employers on how to find qualified individuals with disabilities to be a part of their workforce. To address the misperceptions and other barriers confronting persons with disabilities, the Commission recommends the creation of a coalition of state agencies to adopt a long-term joint agency communications plan. The plan must accomplish the following objectives: 1) increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities by motivating employers to hire; 2) promote a consistent message of awareness among employers about the value persons with disabilities bring to the workforce; and 3) inform employers about the resources that are available to assist their hiring needs, including the single-point of contact. The Commission recommends the coalition be formalized through a cooperative agreement among the agencies to ensure this is a long-term commitment for the state to speak with “one voice” and carry a consistent message to employers.**

Too few people with disabilities are employed as a result of misperceptions and other obstacles confronting them in the workforce. These barriers make it difficult for them to compete with others in the labor force, and present lost opportunities for employers. In order to improve these perceptions, the Commission believes the state should promote a consistent message that would motivate employers to hire persons with disabilities by highlighting the skills and untapped talent these individuals offer Florida’s economy. As state agencies work together to streamline information and create a single-point of contact for employers, they should also adopt a long-term joint agency communications plan that will accomplish the objectives outlined above.

The Commission recommends the state formalize a coalition among state agencies and disability service organizations to adopt this communications plan. This will promote a coordinated effort and a long-term commitment among these organizations to improving employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. The coalition should be created through a cooperative agreement that should include (but not be limited to) the following state agencies: the Department of Economic Opportunity, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Division of Blind Services, the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and the Department of Children and Families. These agencies should also encourage other public and private organizations to participate in this agreement, such as the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC).

In addition to the objectives outlined above, the cooperative agreement should accomplish the following purposes:

1. **Establish a vision and mission** – this document should represent a covenant among these organizations that they will maximize resources and coordinate with each other to improve employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. The mission should be consistent with the intent to create “one state voice,” deliver a consistent message that will resonate with employers, and ensure that future agency leadership will commit to these efforts.
2. **Define the roles and responsibilities** – the agreement should define the roles and responsibilities of each organization that participates in this commitment. This should specifically identify each agency’s department and staff who will be responsible for communicating with employers and business groups. It should assist the agencies in providing guidance to their local entities, such as the workforce boards and local VR offices. These roles must be tied to each agency’s core mission to demonstrate how these efforts are consistent with their statutory responsibilities. The roles and responsibilities of the single-point of contact (outlined in Recommendation 1) should also be incorporated into this agreement to further the agencies’ efforts in marketing the “Ability Works” portal and help desk to the business community.
3. **Identify strategies to promote coordination** – The cooperative agreement should serve as a guiding document for the agencies to coordinate their efforts in reaching employers. For example, the agencies can develop a presentation package to deliver to business groups, and designate which agency should target which particular group. This would avoid duplication and ensure agencies are maximizing efforts to reach a large employer audience. These strategies should identify ways the agencies can share resources to offset potential costs, such as advertising the toll free number to the help desk, developing marketing materials on other resources available to employers, producing videos to showcase success stories, etc. Furthermore, the agreement should provide guidance on how agencies can encourage their contracted providers to participate in this coordinated effort through training opportunities. While providers are not employees of an agency, they do have contractual agreements that outline training requirements to provide services to agency clients. The agencies should provide training opportunities through workshops and materials to assist these organizations in effectively communicating with employers. This will ensure these efforts are coordinated among public and private entities.
4. **Provide accountability measures to ensure sustainability** – The agreement should provide reasonable benchmarks to assist the agencies in the implementation of the communications plan. Each agency head should report to the Governor’s Office (at least annually) their progress in reaching employers. The agreement should also provide timetables when the agencies should reconvene as a group to share any insights gained from their communications efforts and develop further strategies to improve coordination. Finally, the agreement should identify measurements to help agencies monitor the progress of employment outcomes for persons with disabilities.

Once the cooperative agreement is developed, the participants should agree upon a date to implement the communications plan, such as October's Disability Employment Awareness Day or the launch date of the "Ability Works" portal.

## **Recommendation 3: Increase Work Experiences for Students Receiving a Special Diploma**

**Pursuant to Executive Order 11-161, the Commission examined how opportunities for firsthand experiences in the workplace can improve employment readiness for students with disabilities prior to when they exit high school. The Commission finds that such experiences should be maximally available to students with disabilities and not just those individuals who have left the public education system. Requirements for the Special Diploma option offered to students with disabilities enrolled in Florida’s public education system should be revised along the same lines as recent reforms to the requirements for a Standard Diploma so that these students have similar guaranteed opportunities to “satisfy academic requirements in more hands-on, career-related ways.”<sup>8</sup> The Commission recommends the Florida Department of Education revise its requirements for the Special Diploma Option 1, so that all students receive credit in the following trilogy of career courses: Career Experiences, Career Preparation, and Career Placement.**

Executive Order 11-161 charges the Commission to develop strategies that will “create a seamless transition between education and employment” for individuals with disabilities. In the 2012 Report, the Commission recommended state policymakers, business leaders, and community partners promote and use internship and work experience opportunities for individuals with disabilities as a key tool to improving perceptions and addressing the employment disparity confronting these individuals by: 1) expanding entry-points into the workforce; 2) establishing a foundational skill set; and 3) improving their long-term prospects in the workforce. The Commission defined “internship” as an inclusive term that encompasses opportunities that provide a meaningful work experience on a temporary basis, which may or may not lead to employment, for both the individual and employer.

For the individual, the internship allows him or her to acquire valuable experience and build a resume, as well as the chance to be evaluated. For the employer, the internship provides the opportunity to meet an immediate business need with minimal risk, try a candidate out before hiring on a full-time basis, and to expand the pool of candidates to address the talent shortage. Internships have the potential to help alleviate employers’ hesitancy in hiring persons with disabilities and change perceptions regarding their

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<sup>8</sup> Don Gaetz and Will Weatherford. “Gaetz, Weatherford column: Act makes education a path to jobs.” *Tampa Bay Times*. Tuesday, June 11, 2013. Available online at: <http://www.tampabay.com/opinion/columns/gaetz-weatherford-column-act-makes-education-a-path-to-jobs/2126014>

qualifications for job openings.<sup>9</sup> Internships can be facilitated by the employer, or developed through a collaboration of community partners (such as a school district, vocational rehabilitation organization, or business leadership network). Some of these programs offer financial incentives to companies that participate in internship opportunities, such as reimbursement for the payroll cost.

The 2013 Legislative Session saw the passage of landmark legislation which defines the fundamental mission of Florida's public education system as preparing students for college and careers. The Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act fully integrates "economically relevant career education into Florida's K-12 system. Under the expanded law, students will get more choices. They will have not only a college-prep option but also a career-technical option to obtain a high school diploma."<sup>10</sup>

In signing the CAPE Act on April 22, Governor Rick Scott noted:

*The fundamental goal of Florida's K-12 education system is to prepare our students for future success in college and careers . . . The creation of multiple pathways for demonstrating the skills required for high school graduation, including earning national industry certifications in over 200 different professions, occupations, and careers recognizes the diverse interests and needs of our students.*

By offering multiple pathways to a Standard Diploma and connecting skills taught to students to employers' needs, the CAPE Act makes the public education system sensitive to the needs of a diverse student population that includes students with disabilities, meaning the legislation will improve employment prospects for future generations of Floridians with disabilities.

### The Special Diploma

While the Standard Diploma is the primary diploma awarded to students who satisfy academic requirements (including Next Generation Sunshine State Standards) and successfully graduate from the state's education system, the awarding of a Special Diploma is available to any student who has been identified, in accordance with rules established by the State Board of Education, as having an intellectual disability; an autism spectrum disorder; a language impairment; an orthopedic impairment; another health impairment; a traumatic brain injury; an emotional or behavioral disability; a specific learning disability such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or developmental aphasia; or a hearing or dual sensory impairment. In order to obtain a Special Diploma, eligible students must complete alternate graduation requirements set by their local school districts. There are two types of Special Diplomas: Option 1 and Option 2. While every

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<sup>9</sup> FSU Professors Born, Patty and Randy Dumm. "Key Factors that Assist Employers to Recruit, Interview, Hire and Retain People with Disabilities." Commissioned by The Able Trust, June 2011. p.18

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* 8.

school district offers Option 1, there are a number of school districts that choose not to offer Option 2, which focuses on employment.

Florida law ensures the right of any student to work toward and earn a Standard Diploma, and Individual Educational Plan (IEP) teams are encouraged to choose it for their students if there is any chance of them being able to meet the requirements. IEP teams and their students may choose to work toward a Special Diploma at any point it is determined that the student cannot meet the requirements for a Standard Diploma. While Special Diploma curricula can include employment and community living skills, and even semester-long employment (typically offered under Option 2), school districts still have the option to not offer such courses. This will remain true under the CAPE Act as well, since the K-12 reforms to graduation requirements only apply to the Standard Diploma.

More than a decade of research literature indicates that the best predictors of successful post-school outcomes for students with disabilities are paid and unpaid work experiences during the last years of secondary school.<sup>11</sup> In light of the fact that approximately 2,700 Florida students graduated with a Special Diploma Option 1 in the 2011-2012 school year,<sup>12</sup> it is imperative that they have these employment experiences as part of their curriculum. The Commission recommends the Department of Education examine the requirements of the Special Diploma Option 1, and incorporate the trilogy of career courses into these requirements to ensure students receive a work experience before exiting high school. The trilogy of courses includes:

- **Career Preparation** – The purpose of this course is to enable students with disabilities to acquire the career knowledge and skills necessary to identify career options, obtain community resources, and develop work-related behaviors. The course will provide a foundation for further progress toward achieving the student’s desired post-school outcomes related to a career.
- **Career Experiences** – The purpose of this course is to enable students with disabilities to further develop the career knowledge and skills necessary to identify career options, access community resources, and practice work-related behaviors. The course will provide guided practice and experiences in school and community work situations aimed at further progress toward achieving the student’s desired post-school outcomes related to a career.

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<sup>11</sup> Colley, D., & Jamison, D. (1998). Postschool results for youth with disabilities: Key indicators and policy implications. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 21(2), 145–160.

Luecking, R. (2009). *The way to work: How to facilitate work experiences for youth in transition*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.

Luecking, R., & Fabian, E. (2001). Paid internships and employment success for youth in transition. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 23, 205–221.

<sup>12</sup> Florida Department of Education: <http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/pubstudent.asp>

- **Career Placement** – The purpose of this course is to enable students with disabilities to use the career knowledge and skills necessary to identify career options, access community resources, and apply work-related behaviors. The course will provide placement in a job in the community aimed at further progress toward achieving the student’s desired post-school outcomes related to a career.

The CAPE Act reforms will prove to be transformational to Florida’s public education system by guaranteeing students with more choices, particularly career-technical options, in how they can satisfy academic requirements to earn a Standard Diploma. While it is important that state policies continue to encourage students with disabilities to work toward a Standard Diploma, the availability of the Special Diploma will remain important for students who, at the end of the day, simply have a different set of needs. As long as the Special Diploma serves an important purpose for a significant number of Florida’s students with disabilities, the same fundamental goal of Florida public education should be seen as applicable across the system’s different diploma programs, hence the term “fundamental.” Building on the CAPE Act reforms and guaranteeing similar choices for students working toward a Special Diploma will only improve the K-12 system’s sensitivity to the diverse needs of Florida students and the employment prospects for more individuals with disabilities in future generations.

## **Recommendation 4: Improve the Transition IEP Process for Students with Disabilities**

**The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides that students with disabilities at age 16 are entitled to receive a transition Individual Education Plan (IEP) to identify measurable post-secondary goals that will help prepare them for adult life. During this process, the school system is responsible for mobilizing a team of individuals and agencies that can assist the student in achieving those goals. However, there is much room to improve the participation of these agencies in the IEP process as students exit high school. The Commission recommends a workgroup develop a cooperative agreement among the Florida Department of Education and other state agencies to improve collaboration between the school systems and agencies in assisting students with disabilities in achieving their post-secondary goals.**

The transition IEP process was designed to improve the graduation levels for students with disabilities and prepare them for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living: “This transition mandate reflects the concern that high school-age students with disabilities remain at risk of dropping out of school or otherwise leaving school unprepared for adult life and responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup> Though the state has made great strides to improve the graduation rate of students with disabilities, there is much room to improve the transition IEP process to help students achieve their post-secondary goals. There is an inconsistency at the local school level as to the participation of state agencies and other organizations in the transition IEP development. Furthermore, the process does not promote contact between students exiting the school system and agencies that might help them transition to the workplace, resulting in a delay in obtaining services to gain employment. At the state level, there is little accountability to ensure that collaboration occurs between the schools and agencies. Thus, the Commission believes the state could provide better guidance to school systems and state agencies in assisting students with disabilities through this transition process.

The Commission recommends a workgroup develop a cooperative agreement among the Florida Department of Education and other state agencies to improve collaboration between the school systems and agencies in the transition IEP process. This agreement should accomplish the following objectives: 1) define the roles and responsibilities of the schools, agencies, and other participants in the transition IEP process; 2) provide process direction to school districts and local entities, particularly in regards to the process point when a student should be contacted by an agency; and 3)

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<sup>13</sup> Developing Quality Individual Education Plans: A Guide for Instructional Personnel and Families, Florida Department of Education, 2012, p. 45

identify accountability measures to ensure collaboration occurs during the transition process. The agreement should address (but not be limited to) the following issues:

- Guidance to the IEP team on plan development to ensure the post-secondary goals in the IEP align with other agency processes (such as the Individual Plan for Employment developed by VR);
- Strategies to improve communication among the schools, the state agencies, and other organizations that are involved in the transition process;
- The age of the student (or process point) where the agency should participate in the transition IEP prior to when the student exits high school;
- Data sharing (if appropriate) between school systems and the appropriate state agencies to ensure the agency connects with the student and family prior to exiting high school;
- Training to assist the IEP team and agency personnel in identifying programs, services, and other community resources that can assist the student in reaching their post-secondary goals; and
- Accountability measures to ensure appropriate collaboration occurs between school systems and state agencies throughout the transition process.

The workgroup should include, at a minimum, the following agencies: the Department of Education's Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Division of Blind Services, and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. The workgroup should also seek input from other public and private organizations, such as representatives from career and technical schools, the state college and universities system, and other adult service provider organizations. Once the agreement is developed, the workgroup should monitor the progress of its implementation at the local level and provide guidance if needed. The Commission believes these efforts can be implemented with current agency resources, and no additional funding will be needed.

## **Recommendation 5: Provide Follow-Along Services for Individuals with Mental Health Disorders**

**Supported Employment is an evidence-based best practice and contributor to the long-term recovery of individuals with serious and persistent mental illnesses. Having a job facilitates increased self-sufficiency, mental wellness, and community integration. Currently, individuals served within the public mental health system have limited long-term supports available to help them maintain employment after obtaining a job. Many would benefit from Supported Employment services, but they are unavailable because there is no funding for a continuation of supportive services (also known as “follow-along”), once a successful job placement has occurred. As a result, many of these individuals lose their jobs and reenter the VR system or remain unemployed and dependent on public programs. The Commission recommends the state provide funding to support follow-along services for individuals with mental health disorders referred from the public mental health system to the VR system, to assist them in maintaining their employment after being placed in a job.**

Currently, there is no dedicated state funding for Supported Employment follow-along services to assist individuals with mental health disorders<sup>14</sup> to maintain employment, once achieved. The state Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH) program is administered by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF). Community-based services funded through this program are contracted through seven Managing Entities (MEs), each of which then subcontracts with local mental health and substance abuse providers. Though there may be a consistent array of services statewide, the availability of a particular service depends on local funding decisions. Generally, other needed supports and services (e.g., case management; psychiatric services; crisis stabilization; forensic mental health interventions; Florida Assertive Community Treatment Teams) receive priority, and there are no funds available for Supported Employment follow-along services.

When working with individuals with mental health disorders who seek VR services, VR must rely on the willingness and ability of local community-based providers to provide follow-along services for individuals who need them, once they are placed on a job. Community mental health providers who attempt this appear to rely on Medicaid reimbursement for case management services, but the skill-set of case managers and

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<sup>14</sup> This is defined as an impairment of the mental or emotional processes, which substantially interferes with a person's ability to meet the ordinary demands of living (pursuant to s. 394.455(18), F.S.). This term does not include developmental disabilities, intoxication, or conditions manifested only by antisocial behavior or substance abuse impairment. It is, however, acknowledged that co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders are the rule, rather than the exception.

employment specialists are not the same. The availability of case management time is impinged, and employment supports, though well-meant, are insufficient to maintain stability on the job. This makes it very difficult for VR to successfully place an individual who needs continuing support in a job.

In his Recommended Budget for Fiscal Year 2013-2014, Governor Scott recommended funding for Supported Employment services for individuals with developmental disabilities on the waiting list for Home and Community Based Medicaid waiver programs administered by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD). Similar to the challenges confronting individuals with mental health disorders, individuals on the APD wait list have had access to limited services, due to the lack of sufficient funds to bring them onto a waiver program. This recommendation set a precedent: while limited services have historically been reserved for the most extreme cases or crisis situations, employment is the most direct and cost-effective means in helping an individual achieve independence and self-fulfillment, which are very often the goals of such public programs. In accord with this precedent, the Commission recommends establishing a similar dedicated source of funding for Supported Employment follow-along services to assist individuals with mental health disorders referred to Vocational Rehabilitation from the public mental health system.

### The Supported Employment Model

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) use a Supported Employment model that provides services in two phases: job development and short-term coaching/stabilization services (Phase 1) and long-term systemic follow-along supports (Phase 2). Phase 1 ends after the individual demonstrates satisfactory job performance, usually after 150 days of stable employment. Once this occurs, VR closes the case, and another entity (e.g., APD; a community mental health provider; natural supports) provides the extended, on-going support services (Phase 2).

Federal law governing the VR programs precludes opening a Supported Employment case unless there is a “reasonable expectation” that Phase 2 follow-along services will be available. The need for Phase 2 supports assumes the individual will experience ongoing severe levels of disability or periodic life changes and personal tensions that could cause job instability. Follow-along services are designed to be dynamic and to change in intensity and duration, consistent with the needs of each individual during periods of job instability and possibly during job loss and re-employment activities.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See pages 2-91 through 2-97 of the APD Handbook:

[http://portal.flmmis.com/FLPublic/Portals/0/StaticContent/Public/HANDBOOKS/DD\\_Waiver\\_Handbook\\_Final\\_Rule\\_Nov\\_2010.pdf](http://portal.flmmis.com/FLPublic/Portals/0/StaticContent/Public/HANDBOOKS/DD_Waiver_Handbook_Final_Rule_Nov_2010.pdf)

Also see page 2 of this summarized services brochure: <http://apd.myflorida.com/brochures/supports-and-services-brochure.pdf>

Though VR provides Phase 1 Supported Employment services to individuals with mental health disorders, many Supported Employment cases cannot be opened because there is no “reasonable expectation” that follow-along services (Phase 2) will be available to help them maintain employment. During the 2012-2013 fiscal year, VR served 13,778 individuals whose primary disability was a mental health diagnosis that could place them into consideration as a “priority client” for the public mental health system (e.g., schizo-affective disorder; schizophrenia; bi-polar disorder; major depression). Only 761 (5.5 percent) of them received supported employment services. It should also be noted that the successful rehabilitation rate for individuals whose primary disability is a mental health diagnosis has been among the lowest of all disability groups served by VR. The Commission believes that investing in Phase 2 follow-along services for public mental health clients would increase successful rehabilitations, provide an avenue for recovery not currently available, and allow a much larger number of customers to exit the public mental health system to live successfully in communities of their choice.

For this reason, the Commission recommends establishing a dedicated funding source within the Department of Children and Families SAMH program to provide Phase 2 Supported Employment services for 1,000 individuals with mental health disorders referred from the public mental health system to VR for Supported Employment services. The funding would be disbursed through the state’s ME regions, and the customers selected through a referral process designed in a collaboration between VR and DCF-SAMH. Community-based provider organizations will provide follow-along services to public mental health priority clients who have been successfully placed in a job by VR, through contracts with the managing entities. No additional infrastructure is required. Data provided by the DCF-SAMH program indicates that the cost of follow-along services for each individual would be approximately \$1,200 annually, at a total cost of \$1,200,000. The return on investment in Florida’s economy for every \$1 of VR funding is documented at \$6.97; there is no reason to believe this ROI would not hold for these individuals, as well.

## Conclusion

The recommendations of the 2013 Commission Report are intended to serve as critical steps to fulfill the vision Governor Rick Scott charged the Commission of improving employment opportunities for Floridians with disabilities. These strategies are designed to assist organizations, both within and outside of state government, to carry out these initiatives and create a business environment that is amenable to hiring persons with disabilities. Moving forward, the Commission intends to continue its mission in identifying additional public policy solutions that will tackle the barriers confronting these individuals in the workforce.

The Commission will continue to hold periodic meetings around the state to seek input from employers to understand how the state can inform them of these initiatives and better assist businesses in hiring persons with disabilities. During this process, the Commission will work to implement the recommendations in this report, as well as develop strategies to address additional issues, including:

- **Additional Barriers within the Disability Employment System** – The process map (Appendix C) assisted the Commission to identify systemic barriers that hinder persons with disabilities from seeking, obtaining, and maintaining employment. The Commission will continue to work with the state agencies and other organizations to address these barriers and develop strategies that will improve collaboration and sustainability.
- **Ways to Cultivate Private-Sector Jobs for this Population** – The Governor and state policymakers have made great strides in getting the state back to work, and making Florida the best place to work and start or grow a business in the process. Executive Order 11-161 charges the Commission to “build partnerships with the business community to cultivate private-sector jobs” as part of these efforts. The Commission will examine ways to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities by looking at the state’s economic development structure (e.g., tax incentives; preference in state contracting for businesses owned by individuals with disabilities or employing people with disabilities, etc.).
- **Further Improve Employment Readiness for Students in the College and University System** – This year, the Commission focused on students ages 16 to 22 who are exiting the high school system, as a starting point to improving employment readiness for students with disabilities. The Commission will partner with colleges and universities to identify and develop transition programs that will assist students with disabilities in preparing for the workforce.

Persons with disabilities play a significant role to Florida’s economy, and the Commission is determined to help Governor Rick Scott to fulfill his top priority – ensuring that Floridians, including persons with disabilities, gain employment. It is our hope and goal to make Florida the best place for businesses to find these talented individuals, and for persons with disabilities to find work and become successful in life!

# Appendix A

## Executive Order 11-161



# STATE OF FLORIDA

## OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

### EXECUTIVE ORDER NUMBER 11-161

#### (Creation of Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities)

WHEREAS, more than one million Floridians, roughly twelve percent of our state's working-age population, live daily with some form of physical or mental disability; and

WHEREAS, on July 26, 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (the "ADA"), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities in access to employment, transportation, telecommunications, state and local services, and public accommodations; and

WHEREAS, by Executive Order 93-166, Governor Lawton Chiles created the Florida Coordinating Council for the Americans with Disabilities Act to encourage a cooperative effort between state and local governments, the education community, the private sector, and the disability community with respect to implementing the ADA; and

WHEREAS, by Executive Order 97-56, Governor Chiles dissolved the Florida Coordinating Council and created the Americans with Disabilities Act Working Group (the "Working Group") in order to refocus Florida's efforts in the implementation of the ADA by serving as a clearinghouse of information for state agencies and consumers; and

WHEREAS, by Executive Order 99-80, Governor Jeb Bush expanded the Working Group to provide information, referrals, education, and recommendations for compliance and implementation of the ADA in order to increase the independence and quality of life of Floridians with disabilities; and

WHEREAS, by Executive Order 07-148, Governor Charlie Crist dissolved the Working Group and created the Governor's Commission on Disabilities (the "Commission") to advance public policy for the disability community, to provide a forum for advocates representing groups within the disability community, and to develop and voice unified concerns and recommendations to address the issues facing the disability community; and

WHEREAS, it is in the interest of Floridians with disabilities, and the public as a whole, that a Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities be created to advance employment and job opportunities for persons with disabilities in order to maximize their independence and

quality of life, to identify government inefficiencies that burden individuals with disabilities seeking necessary services, and to leverage state and community resources to advance service delivery and create incentives for individuals with disabilities to achieve their independence; and

WHEREAS, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, between October 2008 and June 2011, the rate of job loss among workers with disabilities far exceeded that of workers without disabilities, with the proportion of employed U.S. workers identified as having a disability declining by 9 percent; and

WHEREAS, according to the American Community Survey, from 2005 to 2007 only 38.3 percent of working-age Floridians with disabilities were employed, while 78.7 percent of working-age Floridians without a disability were employed;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RICK SCOTT, as Governor of Florida, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the laws and Constitution of the State of Florida, do hereby promulgate the following Executive Order, effective immediately:

Section 1.

The Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities (hereinafter referred to as the "Commission") is hereby created. The vision of the Commission shall be to advance job and employment opportunities for Floridians with disabilities in order to help those Floridians achieve greater independence. The mission of the Commission will be to provide public policy solutions and strategies to the Governor and state policymakers to fulfill this vision.

Section 2.

The responsibilities of the Commission shall include, but not be limited to:

- a. Identifying and recommending strategies to cultivate job opportunities for persons with disabilities in the State of Florida. The Commission shall:
  1. Utilize existing resources and service providers to enhance employment readiness for persons with disabilities.
  2. Continue efforts made by the Governor's Commission on Disabilities to create a seamless transition between education and employment by partnering with community colleges and universities to provide transition programs.
  3. Build partnerships with the business community to cultivate private-sector jobs and fulfill the Administration's 7-7-7 Job Creation Plan.
- b. Identifying barriers in state and local programs that hinder individuals with disabilities from gaining employment and proposing solutions to mitigate those barriers. The Commission shall:

1. Develop policy recommendations to streamline state and local programs that serve Floridians with disabilities and make them more accessible to consumers.
  2. Identify unnecessary regulations and/or bureaucratic processes that restrict or delay access to employment and employment training services.
- c. Developing and leveraging state and community resources to advance service delivery. The Commission shall:
1. Increase coordination of resources to breakdown silos and maximize funding opportunities.
  2. Provide community-based solutions that incorporate resources within the community, such as family networks, schools and educational programs, businesses, service providers, community centers, and state and local governments.

### Section 3.

The Commission shall, no later than July 26, 2012, and on July 26 of every subsequent year until the Commission's expiration, provide a written report to the Governor outlining the accomplishments during the previous twelve months. The report shall address the following:

- a. Recommendations regarding changes to Florida statutes, administrative rules, policies, and procedures of the State in reference to all duties outlined above;
- b. Accomplishments in creating jobs and employment opportunities for Floridians with disabilities; and
- c. Progress regarding collaborative efforts with stakeholders to accomplish the duties outlined above.

The Commission may also provide interim reports as deemed necessary by the Commission or as requested by the Governor.

### Section 4.

The Commission shall consist of thirteen members appointed by the Governor. Members shall serve at the pleasure of the Governor. The members shall represent the following groups, organizations, and agencies:

- a. Two individual Florida citizens representing persons with physical and/or developmental disabilities;
- b. Four individuals representing the business community, who have personal experience in creating private-sector jobs;
- c. Two individuals representing the state community college system, who have experience in education-to-employment transition programs;
- d. One individual who has a background in employment recruitment and/or experience in job training for persons with disabilities;

- e. One representative from the Able Trust;
- f. One representative from the Division of Vocation Rehabilitation;
- g. One representative from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities; and
- h. One representative from the Agency for Workforce Innovation.

The Governor shall select the Chair from the Commission's membership, and shall appoint an Executive Director. All employees of the Commission shall serve at the pleasure of the Governor. The Governor may suspend or remove the Executive Director or any Member of the Commission with or without cause, and the Governor may fill any vacancy that may arise. The Commission shall be located within the Executive Office of the Governor. The Commission shall meet at least quarterly. A majority of the Commission's current members constitutes a quorum. A quorum must be met in order for the Commission to vote on any proposed action or recommendation. The Commission shall function according to the guidelines set forth by Robert's Rules of Order, unless other procedural guidelines are adopted by the Commission.

#### Section 5.

The Commission is authorized to call upon any State agency, department, division, or office to supply data, reports, or other information the Commission deems reasonably necessary to achieve its objectives. Each agency, department, division, or office of the State under the purview of the Governor is authorized and directed, and all other agencies are requested, to cooperate with the Commission and provide it with such information, personnel, and assistance as necessary to accomplish the purposes of this Executive Order. Universities within the State University System are encouraged to provide the Commission with assistance in performing research necessary to accomplish the purposes of the Commission.

#### Section 6.

Members of the Commission shall serve without compensation, but may receive per diem and travel expenses to the extent allowed by chapter 112, Florida Statutes, and to the extent that funds are available. Per diem and travel expenses shall be paid in accordance with chapter 112, Florida Statutes, and reasonable accommodations shall be made for members on the Commission with disabilities in accordance with the ADA. Members of the Commission who are public officers and employees of state agencies shall be reimbursed for per diem and travel expenses by their respective agencies. All other members of the Commission shall be reimbursed for per diem and travel expenses by the Executive Office of the Governor.

#### Section 7.

The meetings of the Commission shall be noticed and open to the public, and shall be conducted in accordance with Chapter 286, Florida Statutes. Florida's public records law, chapter 119, Florida Statutes, shall apply.

Section 8.

The Commission shall continue in existence until superseded by subsequent Executive Order. This Executive Order supersedes Executive Order 07-148, as amended by Executive Order 08-193.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Florida to be affixed, at Tallahassee, this 26th day of July, 2011.



  
GOVERNOR

ATTEST:

  
SECRETARY OF STATE

2011 JUL 26 PM 5: 20  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

FILED

# Appendix B

## Commission Questionnaire for Employer Interviews



## Questionnaire for Employer Interviews

*The Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities is seeking input from employers in this state to learn about their experiences in hiring persons with disabilities and how to assist them with expanding their pool of talent. This is a list of questions to assist the members of the Commission in gathering this input through personal interviews with employers in their communities. These questions are NOT intended to be read verbatim; rather, they are designed to be conversational style and allow the employer to share their "general" perceptions with the interviewer. The Commission members will be able to take feedback from these interviews to assist the Commission in developing strategies that meet their business needs.*

Good morning/afternoon/evening. Thank you for meeting with me. I would like to talk with you about your experiences as an employer in hiring (and working with) persons with disabilities. The purpose of us talking today is for me to learn from your experiences to help us understand how the State of Florida can assist in meeting your business needs when considering job candidates with disabilities. Again, thank you for meeting with me today.

[Conversational style]

### Section A: General Business Questions

(A1) To start off, I wonder if you could tell me a little about yourself and your organization. What is the mission of your organization? How many employees work for the organization? What are your general expectations of those employees (both at the entry and management levels) to fulfill the organization's mission?

(A2) What types of positions are offered by your organization? What are the general qualifications you look for in candidates to fill these positions? Have you experienced any particular challenges in filling these positions (e.g. finding the skills to perform the essential functions of the position, amount of time to fill the position, etc)?

(A3) What types of training opportunities do you offer to employees? Do you offer internship or work experience opportunities before committing to hire on a full-time basis? If so, what are your expectations of the individual AND what should the individual gain out of the experience?

### Section B: Experiences in Employing Persons with Disabilities

(B1) Now I would like to know a little about your experiences in hiring and/or working with persons with disabilities. What has been your overall perception of these individuals in the workplace? What do you believe are the general perceptions among employers/colleagues in your industry?

(B2) Does your organization actively recruit persons with disabilities? If so, how do you source applicants (i.e. do you work with staffing agencies to find these individuals, or do these individuals generally seek these positions themselves)?

(B3) During the interview/hiring process, do individuals typically disclose their disability and explain what types of accommodations they would need, or do you ask if the individual needs accommodations (without asking to disclose disability)?

(B4) Have you experienced any challenges with employees with disabilities who were hired by the organization (such as job performance, providing accommodations, health insurance issues, etc.)? If so, how did you address those challenges? Do you have a designated HR contact or ombudsman available to employees with disabilities for assistance or general inquiries?

(B5) Do you work with (or have been contacted by) community organizations that serve persons with disabilities? If so, how would you characterize your relationship (or interaction) with these organizations? Have these relationships been effective in serving your business needs, or have they been burdensome? Explain why.

### **Section C: Strategies to Assist Employers**

(Introduction) The Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities was created to develop public policy strategies that address the barriers preventing persons with disabilities from competing in the workforce. Since every economic transaction in a free market is designed to be a "win-win" scenario for both sides, we believe the barriers confronting persons with disabilities present lost opportunities for employers. Thus, we are trying to come up with solutions that benefit both persons with disabilities and employers like you.

(C1) [ASK ALL INTERVIEWEES] What do you believe are the major challenges confronting employers when considering applicants with disabilities? From your experience, what do you believe are the major barriers confronting persons with disabilities in the workforce?

(C2) Have you used resources outside your organization to provide supports/services to employees with disabilities (e.g. job coaching, transportation, assistive technology, etc)? Were you able to find and access these resources? Have you found these resources to be effective?

(C3) The Commission is identifying ways the state can streamline information and create a single-point of contact to make it easier for employers to find qualified applicants with disabilities and learn about the supports/services available to assist these individuals in the workforce. If such a resource existed, what do you believe would be the necessary attributes of a single-point of contact to effectively respond to your business needs?

(C4) As an employer actively hiring persons with disabilities, what motivated you to consider these individuals as part of your workforce? How did you create positive perceptions (or change misperceptions) among your employees toward these individuals?

(C5) In your opinion, what do you see as the prevailing misperceptions within the employer community that prevent persons with disabilities from competing at the same level as those without disabilities? What efforts could be done (at the state and local level) to change those misperceptions?

(C6) The Commission determined persons with disabilities need to be given as many firsthand work experiences to better compete in the workforce and improve perceptions among employers. As an employer, what are the benefits and incentives to facilitating a work experiences (whether for persons with disabilities or other job candidates)? Are there limitations preventing you and other employers from facilitating more work experience opportunities, particularly for persons with disabilities?

(C7) Does your organization partner with other organizations (such as schools, colleges, state agencies, etc.) to facilitate work experiences for persons with disabilities? If so, how could the state and other organizations better assist you in facilitating these opportunities, particularly to fill positions that remain unfilled?

(C8) In closing, understanding the challenges facing employers and barriers confronting persons with disabilities, what other steps could be made to assist your business needs and help these individuals better compete in the workforce?

Thank you very much for taking time to talk with me today. If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about the Governor's Commission, please feel free to contact our executive director, David Darm, at [David.Darm@myflorida.com](mailto:David.Darm@myflorida.com). Once again, thank you for meeting with me today.

# Appendix C

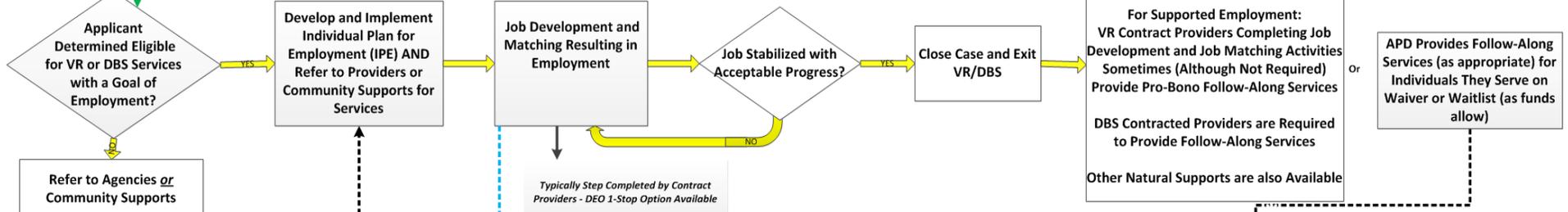
The seal of the State of Florida is a circular emblem. It features a central figure of a woman, likely representing Justice or Liberty, standing on a rocky shore. To her right is a palm tree, and to her left is a sailing ship. The background shows a landscape with a sun and clouds. The outer ring of the seal contains the text "SEAL OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA" at the top and "IN GOD WE TRUST" at the bottom, separated by two stars.

## **Florida's Employment System for Persons with Disabilities who Need Assistance**

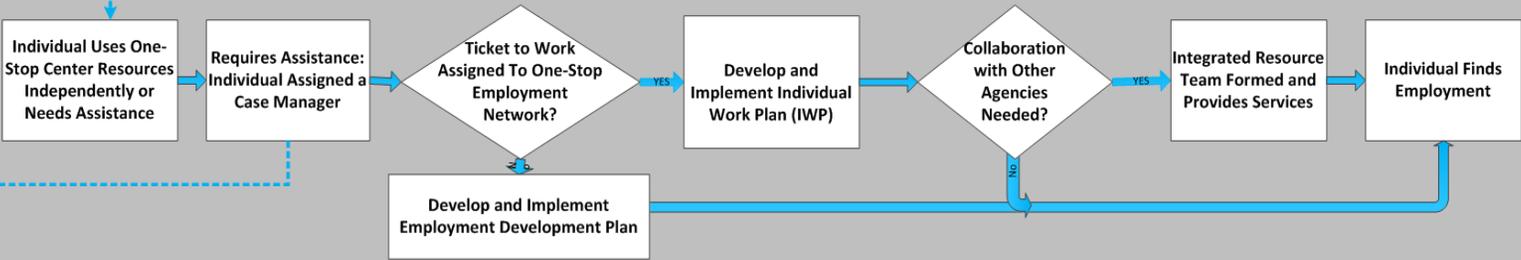
# FLORIDA'S EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES WHO NEED ASSISTANCE

## Gaining and Maintaining Employment

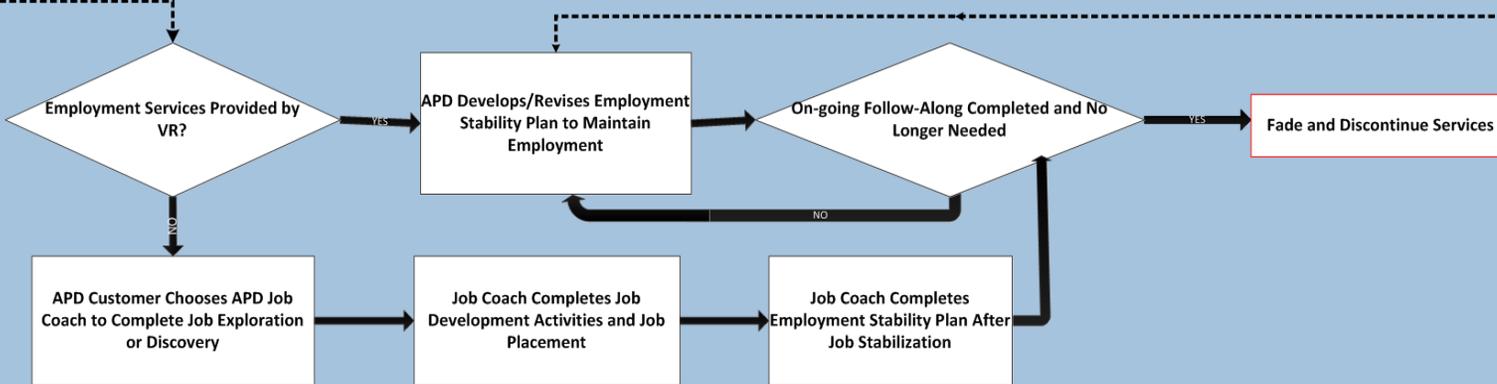
### DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (VR) and DIVISION OF BLIND SERVICES (DBS)



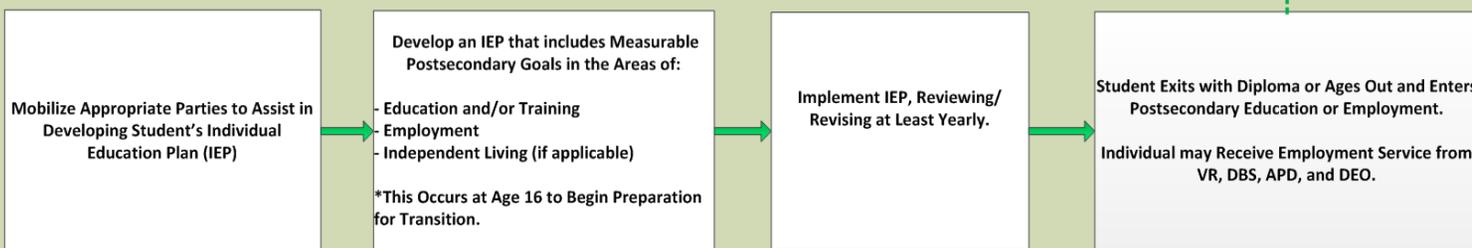
### DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY (DEO)



### AGENCY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (APD)



### BUREAU OF EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATION AND STUDENT SERVICES (BEES)



Two Options Available For Individuals With Disabilities Seeking Employment:

- Option 1: The Division Of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) And/Or Division Of Blind Services (DBS)
- Option 2: The Department Of Economic Opportunity DEO - One Stop Centers
- Both Options Are Available To All Floridians
- Individuals Can Independently Seek Assistance Without Referral Using These Options
- Individuals May Be Referred From Many Public And Private Sources To VR, DBS, And DEO

The Agency For Persons With Disabilities (APD):

- Identifies And Documents Adults (Over 25 Years Old Who Have Exited School) Employment Interests/Goals

Through The Agency's Case Management System:

- Adults (Over 25 Years Old) Desiring Employment Are Referred To VR For Job Development Services And Job Matching
- Individuals, That Are Not Eligible For VR Job Development And Job Matching Services Are Provided These Services Through APD
- APD Coordinates And Funds Follow-along Activities Regardless Of Who Provides Job Development And Job Matching Services (based On Funding Availability)

Bureau Of Exceptional Education And Student Services (BEES)

- Goal Of K-12 Is To Graduate Students Who Are College And Career Ready
- Transition Planning Begins In The 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Or During The School Year In Which The Student Turns 14, Whichever Is Sooner
- At Age 16 The Individual Educational Plan (IEP) Includes Instruction And Services Designed To The Meet Student's Measurable Postsecondary Goals