

Press Release

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APD DIRECTOR PRESENTS EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES

TALLAHASSEE - Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) Director Shelly Brantley presented on Florida's efforts to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities at the 2005 National Conference for the Center for Workers with Disabilities (CWD). The conference was held jointly with the National Association of State Medicaid Directors (NASMD) November 7-9, in Arlington, Virginia.

"Florida's cutting edge approach to employment for individuals with disabilities breaks down barriers by setting aside myths and preconceived notions through education," Brantley said. "Our businesses welcome the chance to diversify their workforce by hiring qualified individuals for meaningful employment opportunities. Individuals with disabilities are Florida's largest minority population and untapped source of employees."

A 2003 survey found that 70 percent of individuals with developmental disabilities who were not working wanted a job. National data shows people with developmental disabilities who work have better personal outcomes than those who do not work. The APD supports several employment programs for individuals with developmental disabilities including:

5-Year Employment Initiative:

On July 1, 2004, the APD embarked on an ambitious 5-Year Employment Initiative for people who have developmental disabilities. This initiative aims to enable at least 50 percent of adults (18-55) receiving APD-funded day services, such as adult day training (ADT), supported employment or non-residential supports and services (NRSS) as of July 1, 2004, to achieve community employment by July 1, 2009.

Supported Employment:

To complement the 5-year Employment Initiative, the Florida Legislature allocated \$1.5 million to the Agency to provide direct supported employment of individuals with developmental disabilities who are waiting for services through a Waiver program. Individuals may be allocated up to \$5,000 pay for supported employment or other services to assist them in obtaining or maintaining employment.

Supported Employment opportunities are also available through specific Agency programs to provide the necessary assistance for individuals to obtain and maintain full-time or part-time basis competitive employment. The individual must earn at least minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled.

Florida Freedom Initiative:

Focused on individuals with developmental disabilities currently enrolled in the Consumer Directed Care Plus (CDC+) program, the Florida Freedom Initiative (FFI) emphasizes the principles of self determination that extend beyond those supported by CDC+. This demonstration project aims to increase control over public funded long-term support while increasing income. FFI promotes employment, home ownership, and financial independence without jeopardizing Medicaid or Social Security Income benefits.

Florida has received a waiver from the Social Security Administration allowing FFI participants to earn significantly more than the law generally permits before their benefits will be reduced. Additionally, FFI participants may save up to \$10,000 annually to purchase, lease, or modify a home; to purchase, lease or maintain a car; to obtain additional education; or to purchase or expand a small business (called a "microenterprise") without losing benefits. The expanded Medicaid waiver coupled with the new Social Security Administration waiver will enable approximately 1,500 individuals more freedom to pursue their individual goals.

Business Leadership Networks (BLNs):

Business Leadership Networks are employer-to-employer networks with a common vision of increasing workforce diversity through the recruitment and hiring of qualified workers with disabilities and assisting businesses and organizations in the recruitment, hiring, training and retaining of people with disabilities. The BLN project is currently being funded by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council and organized by Wilson Resources, Inc. The goal is for each BLN to become self-sustaining. Currently Miami-Dade, Big Bend, and Polk County host BLN opportunities and additional BLNs are proposed for other areas of Florida during the 2005-2006 fiscal year. For more information, visit the Florida BLN website at www.myabilities.org.

Just last week, the Miami-Dade Business Leadership Network (BLN) was honored by the United States Business Leadership Network as BLN Chapter of the Year. The Exceptional Leadership Award was presented during the 2005 Annual Conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Blue Ribbon Task Force:

The APD continues working closely with Governor Bush's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Inclusive Community Living, Transition, and Employment of Persons with Developmental Disabilities, which worked to develop a plan of action for expanding and improving inclusive community living options for individual with developmental disabilities. They also aimed to coordinate the provision of transition services statewide for students with developmental disabilities as they leave school and seek employment, postsecondary education, vocational training, programs and/or adult community services; and expand and improving competitive, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities. The work of the Blue Ribbon Task Force produced numerous recommendations for action and initiated the development of an interagency implementation work group to facilitate the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Task Force.

NGA Policy Academy:

Florida was selected as one of a handful of states to participate in the National Governors Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Improving Outcomes for Young Adults with Disabilities. The Florida delegation, led by Brantley, has outlined a vision "that all individuals, with and without disabilities, live, learn, work and participate together in all life experiences; that this initiative be used to refine and build capacity of existing work in the state."

The Agency for Persons with Disabilities works in partnership with local communities to support persons with developmental disabilities in living, learning and working, in all aspects of community life. Through the dedication and exceptional leadership of Governor Bush and steadfast commitment from the Florida Legislature, we provide critical services and supports for persons with developmental disabilities to reach their full potential in the home and community. We have increased the budget by 144 percent and in 2004-2005 served over 33,000 Floridians with developmental disabilities. APD will reach approximately 40,000 persons with developmental disabilities this year, an increase of 18 percent. Developmental Disabilities encompass a variety of conditions that interfere with a person's ability to function in everyday activities, including spina bifida, autism, cerebral palsy, Prader-Willi syndrome and mental retardation.

The national Center for Workers with Disabilities is a technical assistance center for states enhancing or developing employment supports programs for working persons with disabilities; most of the 30 plus states supported by the Center are developing employment supports with Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) funds established under the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-170).

For more information on the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, visit <http://apd.myflorida.com>.

For more information on Florida's Business Leadership Networks, visit www.myabilities.org