

**Spotlight on Disability Employment: A Job Creation  
Initiative for Persons with Disabilities**

A POLICY PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO  
THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

FLORIDA GUBERNATORIAL FELLOWS PROGRAM, CLASS VI

**BY**

**BEAU BEAUBIEN & MEGAN DUDA**

Tallahassee, Florida

April 8, 2011

“Once we take the right steps, I am absolutely convinced that Florida will become the most exciting place in the world to live and work.”  
-Governor Rick Scott, *2011 Inaugural Address*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Governor Scott has emphasized that one of his chief priorities is to make Florida the number one state for job creation.<sup>2</sup> It is vital that these employment-generating efforts are focused on all segments of our population, especially persons with disabilities. All individuals deserve equal employment opportunities to live life to its fullest capacity, and to be a part of the Governor’s vision of living and working in the most exciting state in the country.

This proposal is simple and straightforward. It advances the creation of a Governor’s Initiative that aims to promote disability employment to the private sector through partnerships and a promotional campaign—mirroring current job creation efforts in the Governor’s office and contributing to the overall employment goal. It was evident in various interviews with disability policy leaders that greater awareness and public attention from our elected and appointed officials must be devoted to touting the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities. This proposal, while not a panacea, provides the public attention that this topic merits and works in conjunction with current organizations like the Able Trust, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD), et al.

Reflecting current job creation efforts, the marketing initiative’s main message to employers interested in hiring persons with disabilities will be, “How can we help you

---

<sup>1</sup> The Office of the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, Rick Scott. “Florida Governor Rick Scott Inaugural Address.” Accessed at: <http://www.flgov.com/2011/01/04/florida-governor-rick-scott-inaugural-address/>

<sup>2</sup> The Office of the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, Rick Scott. “Priorities.” Accessed at: <http://www.flgov.com/priorities-2/>

succeed?”<sup>3</sup> The campaign will also market the countless benefits associated with hiring persons with disabilities, including the fact that “Americans favor businesses that employ the disabled.”<sup>4</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Shortly after his election, Governor Scott announced a plan to get more Floridians back to work and to reduce the unemployment rate of 11.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> While the number of Americans without work is substantial, persons with a disability have much higher rates of unemployment. The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics issued a report that stated,

In 2009, of the 19,054,587 individuals with disabilities ages 18 to 64 years living in the community, 6,723,694 individuals were employed—an employment rate of 35.3 percent. In contrast, of the 170,126,637 individuals without disabilities ages 18 to 64 years living in the community, 126,478,646 individuals were employed—an employment rate of 74.3 percent (2010, p. 18)<sup>6</sup>.

There have been a number of developments in the policies guiding the disabilities community in the United States. Through the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA), the United States government showed a commitment to helping disabled workers. Great strides have been made in assisting persons with disabilities obtain and maintain employment, but the aforementioned unemployment statistics demonstrate a need to prioritize this issue on the state

---

<sup>3</sup> The Office of the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, Rick Scott. “Florida Governor Rick Scott Inaugural Address.” Accessed at: <http://www.flgov.com/2011/01/04/florida-governor-rick-scott-inaugural-address/>

<sup>4</sup> This statistic comes from a “nationwide, random survey about characteristics of good companies [and] was conducted by the Center for Social Development at Boston University, the Gallup Organization and America’s Strength Foundation.” Patton, C. (2007). “Ready and Able.” *Human Resources Executive Online*. Accessed at: [://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=26670972](http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=26670972)

<sup>5</sup> This was Florida’s unemployment rate in February of 2011. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor of Labor Statistics. Accessed at: <http://www.bls.gov/lau/>

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that this data does not take into account the number of persons who are unable to work due to severe cognitive or physical disabilities. “The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics” (2010). *Annual Disability Statistics Compendium*. New York, NY.

and national level. A recent article notes, “Despite an abundance of resources and support for job candidates with disabilities, the slow recovery in employment growth adds yet another obstacle for those individuals in Florida.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, literature and interviews indicate that there are still stigmas attached to hiring persons with disabilities for professional positions.<sup>8</sup>

A pivotal leader within the Agency for Persons with Disabilities stated that we have to better educate private employers on the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities (anonymous, personal communication, March 1, 2011). Similar sentiments were echoed by stakeholders in the disabilities community at a recent focus group titled, *Future of Services to Individuals with Disabilities*.<sup>9</sup> The notion that it should become natural for the private sector to recruit persons with disabilities was widely agreed upon by focus group participants.

There are presently several employment committees or task forces focusing on disability employment throughout the state, including but not limited to the Education and Employment Committee of The Governor’s Commission on Disabilities, the Employment Task Force of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Disability Navigators, and the Able Trust. While there are many resources intended to assist persons with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining employment, unemployment statistics in the disabilities community show that more prominence could and should be given to the topic.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hodges, D. (2011, March 13). “Sluggish Economy Just One More Obstacle for Disabled Job Seekers.” *Tallahassee Democrat*. Accessed at: <http://www.tallahassee.com/article/20110313/BUSINESS/103130323/Sluggish-economy-just-one-more-obstacle-for-disabled-job-seekers>

<sup>8</sup> Patton, C. (2007). “Ready and Able.” *Human Resources Executive Online*. Accessed at: [://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=26670972](http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=26670972)

<sup>9</sup> Focus Group: The Future of Services to Individuals with Disabilities. 10 November 2010, 9:00AM-12:00PM. Major participants included leadership of the Governor’s Office of Policy and Budget, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and the Governor’s Commission on Disabilities. Additional focus group participants included parents of children with disabilities, providers, advocacy group members, physicians, et al.

## **INITIATIVE OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES**

Establishing a Governor's Initiative to highlight disability employment will not create a new agency or office, nor will it require employing new staff. Thus, it is important to analyze the objectives and strategies that will allow this proposal to function. The initiative will require collaboration between the staff of the Executive Office of the Governor and related state agencies and non-profits. The three main objectives of the initiative are: to place disability employment in the spotlight as an executive priority, to promote the hiring of persons with disabilities to the business community, and to forge partnerships with the private sector to further the initiative.

### **Place Disability Employment in the Spotlight**

One of the key goals of this proposal is to place disability employment in the spotlight both for the public and the business community. As mentioned in the previous section, there are immense amounts of resources geared towards disability employment; however, they are strewn across many organizations and government agencies, and are often underutilized. This initiative differs from present missions, because it will have an economic development focus that mirrors the current job creation effort in the Executive Office of the Governor. What's more, this endeavor is not an attempt to replace or be duplicative of current programs—it is simply a means to supply these enterprises with a bully pulpit to publicize the issues.

This initiative is meant to work in concert with the Governor's larger employment efforts. The state's determination to help get Floridians back to work should not fall short of including the disabled community in that goal. Increasing awareness of disability employment will help strengthen Florida's workforce and prepare it to meet the demands of the job market.

Highlighting disability employment will also serve to raise awareness of the disabled community and its ability to be a productive and valuable segment of our working population.

The involvement of the Governor's office in furthering this initiative cannot be understated. When the Governor lends his name to something, the public and the business community pay attention. Creating this initiative from the ranks of the Executive Office of the Governor will give the issue of disability employment the attention it deserves—the Governor's office offers significant access to the public through media outlets and a high traffic website. Furthermore, the staff of the Executive Office of the Governor oversees all of the current job creation initiatives and has the necessary connections to the business community. Highlighting disability employment as a priority of this administration is the first step to having a lasting impact on disability employment in Florida.

### **Promote the Hiring of Persons with Disabilities**

The success of this proposal hinges on its ability to promote the hiring of persons with disabilities to the business community. This initiative will approach the business community in an effort to educate them on the economic and social benefits of hiring disabled employees. One interviewee commented that businesses operate in a demand-based market. The individual noted that in the past, disability advocates have failed to properly sell to businesses the idea that employing persons with disabilities is both noble and potentially profitable (personal communication, April 5, 2011). Therefore, the opportunity in this initiative rests on creating demand from the marketplace by properly educating employers on the benefits associated with increased hiring of persons with disabilities.

There are numerous case studies showing the value of hiring persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities often have a lower rate of turnover than non-disabled employees. Pizza Hut is a company that has employed a significant number of disabled employees. At one time Pizza Hut reported that the turnover rate among their disabled employees was one-fifth that of their non-disabled workers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Forge Partnerships wit the Private Sector**

The final goal of the initiative is to forge partnerships with the private sector to ensure that disability employment is a priority far into the future. Many of these collaborations will come naturally as a result of relationships that already exist between Able Trust and the private sector. Able Trust relies on the support and partnerships of stalwart Florida businesses like Walt Disney World, Publix, Darden Restaurants, and many more. These companies help further Able Trust's mission through financial support and by leading in disability employment efforts. Relationships like those that Able Trust has made with Florida businesses can be used by the initiative to demonstrate to other companies the benefits of disability employment.

The Governor's office has daily contact with small and large businesses in the state and across the globe, thereby placing the Governor in a unique position to advocate for disability employment within these companies, while carrying on the regular business of the state. Governor Scott has shown a commitment to attracting new business to the state, and a diverse workforce with disability employment opportunities can be part of the enticing picture he paints when showcasing Florida. The Governor's office already works closely with private groups like the Florida Chamber of Commerce who's participation in this proposal would be invaluable.

---

<sup>10</sup> "Hiring Disabled Americans is Good Business." *Barrier Free Choices*. Accessed at: [www.barrierfreecareers.net/topics/depend.html](http://www.barrierfreecareers.net/topics/depend.html)

The initiative will also develop a system for recognizing businesses that lead the way in disability employment. This recognition could come in many forms: a sticker for store window fronts, a feature on the Governor’s website, or even public recognition by the Governor similar to the businesses he recognized during the State of the State Address.<sup>11</sup> The partnership and support of the business community is imperative for this initiative to be successful. The Governor’s office is the logical choice to forge these kinds of partnerships.

## **ANALYSIS**

This analysis is used to evaluate the proposed policy option and to provide information vital to its success and perseverance. Furthermore, it provides an understanding of the boundaries of the proposal and furnishes insight to help navigate the challenging environment of disability employment.

### **Strengths**

Simplicity is a major strength of this initiative—the proposal is a straightforward program that focuses on establishing disability employment as one of the Governor’s priorities. The initiative will not create more government, and potentially will not require the allocation of additional funding. Many of the resources that will be highlighted by the initiative are already in place and funded from a variety of sources including federal, state, and private dollars. The initiative simply gives these programs a platform to be more visible and accessible to the public and business communities. The proposal works in collaboration with existing Governor’s initiatives and will give the issue of disability employment the public attention it deserves.

---

<sup>11</sup> The Office of the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, Rick Scott. “Florida Governor Rick Scott Delivers the State of the State Address.” Accessed at: <http://www.flgov.com/2011/03/08/florida-governor-rick-scott-delivers-state-of-the-state-address/>

Helping persons with disabilities find and keep meaningful employment is something that is likely favorable for both political parties—it is a shared value. Persons with disabilities are another arm of Florida’s workforce, and the workforce should reflect the community (anonymous, personal communication, March 1, 2011). At a time when many decisions made by the government are highly scrutinized, this plan should garner strong support both from general public and political audiences. Furthermore, the notion of looking to the private sector for solutions is exceedingly popular in Tallahassee, and Governor Scott has noted in the past that, “the only path to better days is paved with new private sector jobs.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Weaknesses**

One weakness of the initiative is the lack of certitude in determining resource needs for implementation and operation of the program. Other issues come in the form of administrative feasibility. The level of coordination necessary for the initiative to be successful is relatively unknown, as is the amount of human resources required from the Governor’s office and related agencies. Uncertainties regarding resource allocation and administrative ease hint at the potential for future costs, and it is not ideal to propose a solution with a price tag attached in this economic climate. While this initiative is designed to function through the use of existing staff and monies, a level of unpredictability is present.

### **Opportunities**

The opportunities for this initiative are potentially limitless. The prospect of more disabled citizens joining the workforce is positive in a variety of ways. While unemployment is

---

<sup>12</sup> The Office of the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, Rick Scott. “Florida Governor Rick Scott Inaugural Address.” Accessed at: <http://www.flgov.com/2011/01/04/florida-governor-rick-scott-inaugural-address/>

currently high in Florida, eventually a recovered economy may increase the demand for employees, and persons with disabilities can make up a viable portion of the workforce. One must also consider the positive impact that disability employment can have on the employers, and in turn, how those companies can affect our economy.

Additionally, increased disability employment has the potential of helping to reduce the burden on state services. The intention of this proposal is to ultimately create more hiring opportunities for Florida's businesses, and in turn provide more employment for persons with disabilities. For example, APD serves over 29,000 on the current Medicaid waiver, and of that 4,704 are employed.<sup>13</sup> There is a potential for cost savings if more individuals on Medicaid can obtain employment.

### **Threats**

There are several environmental obstacles that threaten the success of this initiative. One such impediment has the potential to be mitigated, and it is the basic fact that many companies may be uninformed about what employing a person with disabilities requires. Also, these businesses may be unsure how incorporate a person with disabilities into their current organizational structure or job descriptions. Major education efforts are necessary to lessen these hurdles. Other barriers to successful disability employment include lack of natural supports within the workplace<sup>14</sup> and inadequate transportation.<sup>15</sup> The current economic climate is another

---

<sup>13</sup> Hodges, D. (2011, March 13). "Sluggish Economy Just One More Obstacle for Disabled Job Seekers." *Tallahassee Democrat*. Accessed at: <http://www.tallahassee.com/article/20110313/BUSINESS/103130323/Sluggish-economy-just-one-more-obstacle-for-disabled-job-seekers>

<sup>14</sup> Wehman, P. and Bricout, J. (1999) "Supported Employment and Natural Supports: A Critique Analysis." Accessed at: <http://www.worksupport.com/main/downloads/article15.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Lemaire, G.S., & Mallik, K. (2008). "Barriers to Supported Employment for Persons with Developmental Disabilities." *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 22(3), 147-155.

threat to this initiative and other related government programs. In this case, a large impediment to success is the availability of jobs and the oversaturation of the workplace. Businesses are less likely to hire persons with disabilities in an environment where unemployment statistics for the state are the highest in recent history. The largest threat to this initiative may be the fact that it must compete with other state proposals and interest groups for financial and logistical support from Florida's chief office.

### **CONCLUSION**

Supporting background material and an analysis of the proposal demonstrate significance and need for a Governor's Initiative on Disability Employment. The three main objectives of the initiative—placing disability employment in the spotlight as an executive priority, promoting the hiring of persons with disabilities to the business community, and forging partnerships with the private sector—are thus recommended to the Executive Office of the Governor for consideration.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank the individuals at Workforce Florida, Inc., the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and those in the greater disability stakeholder community who took the time to assist us with this project.