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State Leadership and Innovation in Disability Employment

Written Testimony of
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Good morning Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the Committee, with a special “Thank You” to Senator Hatch. My name is Don Uchida. I am the Executive Director of the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR). I started working for the agency in 1968 as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. Later, I was promoted to supervisor, then district director, field services director, division director and in 2006, I was appointed to my current position as Executive Director of the agency. I am also the parent of an adult child with multiple disabilities. I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak to the Committee about some innovative ideas we are implementing in Utah that we feel may be replicated with similar success in other states.

The primary purpose of USOR and other rehabilitation agencies throughout the country is to get jobs for people with disabilities. The 2012 Annual Compendium of Disability Statistics indicates that Utah has the smallest difference or gap between the percentages of people with disabilities working full time, year round as compared to people without disabilities working full time year round.¹ This would indicate that what we are doing appears to be working and working well.

We have identified three critical factors that we feel will increase the numbers of individuals with disabilities obtaining employment.

The first factor is having dedicated professional, empowered staff. The second factor is having strategic partnerships with agencies, organizations and businesses that have a common vision of employment for people with disabilities. The third factor is having a supportive Governor and State Legislature willing to work within rules and guidelines provided by federal agencies.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) can be a revenue generating program. In Utah, we effectively use federal and state dollars to train, re-train and sustain people in employment who then become productive tax payers. Over time, our investment consistently provides a return. In 2010, the University of Utah conducted a study and determined that every state dollar invested in Utah’s

¹ 2012 Annual Compendium of Disability Statistics

vocational rehabilitation program had a return of \$5.64.² We run the program like a business. Utah's VR Program is one of the most productive and cost effective programs in the nation with the second lowest cost per successful rehabilitation in Federal Region VIII.³ Nationally, we are the eighth most productive combined agency with the eighth lowest cost per successful rehabilitation.⁴

Utah's VR program is unique within the federal – state VR partnership. Utah's VR accomplishments are especially noteworthy given the diverse population of citizens with disabilities living in Utah and complex geography of the state. We serve a growing refugee and immigrant population from all over the world in our larger cities. We are fortunate in that many of our staff served as missionaries to foreign countries for the Mormon Church and are fluent in a wide variety of languages. Utah covers 84,900 square miles of land and our population is estimated at 2,817,222. About 80% of the people live in a narrow strip of land, that is 100 miles long and 15 miles wide, called the Wasatch Front. The remaining 20% are scattered throughout the state in small rural communities. This requires us to have many one and two counselor offices that cover vast areas of land to serve this population.

These unique features of Utah allow for innovative VR programs to be tried and tested. I am pleased to share with you some of our success in improving the lives of people with disabilities through meaningful employment.

The three factors I mentioned previously are effectively demonstrated by five Utah VR programs:

Partnership with the Department of Workforce Services (DWS). Choose to Work Utah (CTW) is a project originally created to address a lack of job placement resources for people with disabilities in a five county area in rural southwest Utah. With the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998, it was agreed upon to expand the project statewide. CTW is a partnership between USOR and DWS where employment specialists are co-funded by both agencies. These 22 specialists provide job development and job placement exclusively for individuals with disabilities and are strategically placed throughout the state. These specialists include two who work specifically with individuals who are blind and one who is fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). Their work is coordinated by a leadership team from both agencies so there is no duplication of effort or services and resulted in 617 successful job placements in FY-12.⁵

Partnership with Developmental Disabilities Agency. Support Work Independence is a partnership between USOR and the Division of Services for People with Disabilities (DSPD), Utah's Developmental Disabilities Agency. Utah's legislature identified and addressed two problems: First, there was an inability to place individuals with the most significant disabilities into supported employment because there was not a reasonable expectation of long-term funding being available. Second, there were a growing number of people on the waiting list for costly Medicaid services. DSPD's waiting list is based on the same principle as the Order of Selection

² Utah Economic Impact Study

³ Ten State Comparison study FY11-Fy12

⁴ RSA Performance of Combined Agencies FY11 Table 4

⁵ Choose to Work Brochure

is to the VR System-- those with the most significant disabilities or need are served first. The idea behind this partnership is to address the DSPD waiting list from the back or low priority side and it also gave USOR a source of long-term funding for consumers in supported employment. Those individuals would no longer just sit, wait and collect SSI or more expensive Medicaid services; they went to work, reduced their cash benefits, increased their income and paid taxes. In FY 12, DSPD had 156 individuals participating with 84 of them employed. Additionally, USOR successfully closed 59 individuals in supported employment and transferred them to DSPD for the long term funding.⁶

Partnership with Utah Defendant Offender Workforce Development (UDOWD) Taskforce.

The UDOWD Taskforce established in the fall of 2009 as a partnership between federal, state, and local law enforcement, USOR, non-profit and religious organizations. UDOWD's primary goal is to assist offenders in the legal system to obtain employment and to become productive members of society. We want to end the cycle of reoffenders. We assigned VR counselors in several offices to work with individuals with disabilities who are offenders. These VR counselors are trained by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) and are certified as Offender Workforce Development Specialists (ODWS). Services provided to eligible offenders by USOR include treatment, training, placement, and other services designed to remove barriers to successful employment. The employment rate for offenders who complete the UDOWD program is between 65% to 70%, which is well above the national and local recidivism rate for return offenders. The annual cost for incarceration is about \$28,000. Substantial savings to the taxpayer are realized.⁷

In FY 11, 252 offenders with disabilities were successfully employed. In FY 12, there were 544 offenders with disabilities who successfully found and maintained employment.⁸

Partnership with DWS and the Health Dept. Work Ability Project. USOR's Work Incentive Planning Service (UWIPS) helps people receiving Social Security disability benefits (SSI or SSDI) understand how employment impacts their Social Security and other benefits (including Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps, housing) The primary goal, however, is to inform recipients and beneficiaries about the work incentives and safety nets available to them if they decide to work. If you cannot convince the individual that it is in their best interest to try working at a level that will get them off of benefits, increase their disposable income, and improve their quality of life, nothing else you do for them in the VR program is going to make that big of a difference. In Utah, Benefits Specialists, Work Incentive Planners, Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWIC) -- whatever name or acronym you call them--are all under USOR supervision. Funding from DWS and the Health Department comes to USOR via interdepartmental transfers. Funding from Social Security ended in 2012 but we felt this is such a critical service that we continue to fund it with Cost Reimbursement program income. USOR is successful in helping SSI/SSDI recipients obtain gainful employment and reduce or eliminate use of Social Security.^{9,10,11} In FY-12, 671 recipients and beneficiaries of SSI and SSDI were successfully placed into employment.

⁶ 2013 Supported Employment Handout

⁷ UDOWD Flyer

⁸ UDOWD Task Force Update

⁹ Utah Work Incentive Planning Services

¹⁰ 2012 Ticket Data

Partnerships with Business: National Employment Team (the NET), and Greater Salt Lake City Chamber Disability Friendly Business. We are members of the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) National Employment Team or The NET. The NET has helped us with national business contacts and contacts with Federal Agencies. In FY-12 we had the following successful placements: Lowe's - 8, Marriott- 3, the BLM-2, US Forest Service-3 and the IRS-7.

Disability Friendly Business is a partnership with the Greater Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce.¹² Staff works with business owners to help make their businesses more accessible to people with disabilities. Businesses go through a self-assessment, get training on accessibility and accommodations as well as tips on communicating with individuals with disabilities. Upon completion of the training, the business signs an agreement with the chamber, pays a small fee and receives a "Disability Friendly Business" endorsement sticker. If more people with disabilities frequent their business, they may be more inclined to hire someone with a disability.

Although it is difficult to track the exact number of individuals with disabilities that were hired exclusively through Disability Friendly Business partnerships, we estimate at least 44 individuals with disabilities were hired in FY-12 based on self report from consumers, chamber and counselor feedback.

Gubernatorial and Legislative Support

- In October of 2007, Utah's governor signed an executive order "Designating the Intent of Utah State Government to be the Model Employer for People with Disabilities."
- In 2010, the legislature created the "Alternative State Application Process" (ASAP) so an otherwise qualified individual with a disability could bypass the regular competitive state employment application process by going through a "Trial Work Period". If successful, the worker would then enter into the standard probationary work period and become a typical state employee. This is based on the Federal Government's Schedule A process. Although the program did not get fully operational until 2011, and with many state agencies still facing budget cuts and hiring freezes, the Division of Human Resource Management (DHRM) reported that there have been 8 individuals with disabilities hired through ASAP.

In conclusion: Having a job and working is essential in improving the quality of life and increasing the level of independence for people with disabilities. I will use my daughter as an example. She has Autism, Epilepsy and Crohn's Disease and despite the fact that her medical conditions limit her to part time employment, she loves her job, is eager to go to work and sees herself as productive contributing member of society. We feel the ideas and innovations we implemented here will help others like my daughter obtain and sustain meaningful employment now and in the future.

¹¹ 2009 – 2012 SSA VR Cost Reimbursement

¹² Disability Friendly Business Flyer