The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted everyday routines for billions of people across the globe and abruptly put millions across the United States out of work. Unfortunately, in the last few months, many of the obstacles that already existed for at-risk and underserved populations seeking economic self-sufficiency have only grown more pronounced. Individuals with disabilities, in particular, are facing new and immense barriers to gaining meaningful employment and fully participating in the economy amidst this uncertain environment.

How mayors, businesses, city officials, and local leaders respond to this crisis matters a great deal. The new and emerging challenges that stand before us today present an opportunity to approach problems from different angles, invest in creative and innovative solutions, and bring diverse perspectives to the table. Capitalizing on the talents of all segments of the population, including people with disabilities, will be essential for our economic recovery and growth in the coming months. We urge you to rise to the occasion and take steps to ensure that your city is better able to serve students, career seekers, and employees with disabilities, even in a rapidly changing economy.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 26, 2020 MARKS THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENACTMENT OF THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA). The landmark legislation hailed in a new era for the advancement of individuals with disabilities in the United States. For the first time in U.S. history, the law affirmed the right of individuals with disabilities to “fully participate in all aspects of society” and established legal protections and recourse options to help combat widespread discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Since the passage of the ADA, significant progress has been made in addressing basic accessibility issues in the physical environment and raising greater awareness around the challenges that individuals with disabilities may face in society. The adoption of emerging assistive technologies, universal design principles, and virtual and physical accessibility standards has expanded access to a wealth of information and allowed individuals with disabilities to connect with their environments in new ways.

Although there are certainly many reasons to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the ADA, much work remains to be done. Significant gaps still exist today between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities in employment rates, wage levels, poverty levels, and educational attainment. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey (ACS), 10.4% of non-institutionalized working-age U.S. citizens (ages 21-64) reported a disability in 2018.¹ For most individuals living with disabilities, meaningful work opportunities remain limited, out of reach or financially unfeasible due to benefits cliffs related to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Consider the following statistics from the ACS for the year 2018:

While 80% of working-age U.S. citizens without disabilities reported holding employment, only 37.8% of non-institutionalized working-age U.S. citizens with disabilities reported holding employment. At the same time, only 24.3% of individuals with disabilities held full-time jobs in 2018, compared to 61.1% of working-age individuals without disabilities. Only 7.3% of unemployed individuals with disabilities were actively searching for work in 2018, compared to 16.6% of unemployed working-age individuals without disabilities.

According to ACS data, median annual earnings for individuals with disabilities were $40,500 in 2018, compared to $49,200 for individuals without disabilities. Also that same year, the poverty rate for individuals with disabilities stood at 26% compared to 10% for individuals without disabilities. Only 15.2% of individuals with disabilities reported having earned a Bachelor’s degree or above in 2018, compared to 35.2% of working-age individuals without disabilities.

These vast statistical disparities are no coincidence. They indicate that the majority of individuals with disabilities living in the United States today still face unequal access and opportunity when it comes to higher education and competitive, integrated employment. As critical as the ADA continues to be for guaranteeing the rights of individuals with disabilities at the national level, there is no substitute for awareness and action at the local level to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to meaningful educational and employment opportunities. Particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that individuals and employers in cities across the country understand their rights and responsibilities under the ADA.

In August 2019, the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) Workforce Development Council (WDC) formally engaged with the State Exchange on Employment and Disability (SEED), an initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s (DOL) Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP), to help address barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities in cities across the United States. The partnership was announced at the September 2019 WDC Board Meeting in Washington, DC.

As part of USCM’s partnership with SEED, the WDC formed a Disability Employment Working Group in October 2019 to study disability employment issues facing cities and make recommendations for identifying and collecting disability employment best practices from organizations in USCM member cities. The WDC Disability Employment Working Group currently consists of more than 20 WDC member cities (see Appendix A) spread across the United States, and has been convening on a periodic basis to discuss disability employment issues, solicit completed Disability Employment Best Practice Surveys (see Appendix B) from USCM members, and share disability employment best practices.

The Working Group invites mayors, workforce development professionals, city officials, nonprofit leaders and community members to read through this best practice publication and consider how they can advocate for and implement disability-inclusive policies that lead to increased educational and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in their own cities.

If you would like to participate in this best practice sharing initiative or share a disability employment best practice from your city with the Disability Employment Working Group, please reach out to Micah Kyler at mkyler@usmayors.org for additional information. The Working Group welcomes the participation of all USCM members in this important collaboration with SEED and hopes to recognize leaders across the country for their efforts in tearing down the “shameful wall of exclusion” that prevents so many individuals with disabilities from economic independence and full participation in society.

Sincerely,

TOM COCHRAN
CEO & Executive Director
The United States Conference of Mayors

PAMELA NABORS
President & CEO, CareerSource Central Florida
Chair, WDC Disability Employment Working Group

To solicit disability employment best practices, the WDC Disability Employment Working Group agreed on a standard survey template (see Appendix B) that could be used to collect submissions from organizations with workforce development initiatives targeted at increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. WDC staff distributed this survey template to WDC members and reached out to organizations in USCM member cities to encourage them to submit best practices. The Working Group ultimately collected 23 Disability Employment Best Practice Surveys from 14 different states and 20 different cities across the United States, resulting in over 100 total pages of best practice survey material, not including additional materials and attachments linked to the surveys.

WDC staff developed a standardized template (see Appendix B) to evaluate and analyze the completed disability employment best practice surveys. After conducting a review of the submitted best practice surveys, WDC staff identified common themes between the surveys and determined which surveys to include in the best practices publication as well as appropriate categories to break the publication into. The best practices that appear in the sections below are divided into five categories:

1. System-Wide Initiatives
2. Advisory Boards, Committees and Mayor’s Offices
3. Career Development Programs
4. Career Fairs & Educational Events
5. Innovative Approaches

System-wide initiatives aim to create a more robust workforce system that is better equipped to assist individuals career seekers as they seek meaningful employment opportunities. The best practices described in this section demonstrate the strength of organizations in cities working together as a community to focus on eliminating barriers to employment rather than working alone in silos. By strategizing together and coordinating resources, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and other local entities can improve the ability of their local region to efficiently serve career seekers by offering more entry points into the workforce system and providing a wider variety of specialized services to a larger population than before. The following best practices are included in this category:

- Project CASE (Creating Access to Successful Employment) – Louisville, KY
- Tempe’s BEST: Building Employment Supports & Training – Tempe, AZ
- Ticket to Work – Orlando, FL
- State of Colorado Disability Employment Initiative – Denver, CO
- Disability Program Navigator & Disability Employment Initiative Demonstration Grants – Hartford, CT
- US Department of Labor Disability Employment Initiative (Rounds 4 & 7) – Waterbury, CT