



## **Laying the Groundwork: Add Us In Expert Strategy Meeting**



**Office of Disability Employment Policy  
United States Department of Labor**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP) introduced the Add Us In initiative – an effort designed to identify and develop strategies to increase employment opportunities within the small business community for people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> In February 2011, ODEP convened an Expert Strategy Meeting (ESM) in Washington, D.C. to engage subject matter experts to explore disability employment policy through the lens of diversity and identify strategies to promote systems change<sup>2</sup> within the workforce development system.

Through the Add Us In initiative, four consortia are working to increase the capacity of small businesses to employ people with disabilities. Consortium members include representatives of small businesses from underrepresented and historically excluded communities, including those owned and operated by racial and ethnic minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; women; veterans; and people with disabilities and other similar groups. The consortia are charged with identifying and creating successful, replicable business engagement models that small businesses in different industries can adopt to shift the paradigm of workplace diversity to be inclusive of people with disabilities. Related to this are the companion goals of developing sustainable partnerships among small businesses, diversity-serving organizations, youth-serving organizations and disability-serving organizations, and identifying national and local networks of experts skilled in simultaneously meeting the employment needs of individuals with disabilities and the hiring needs of small business owners.

More than 40 thought leaders from a cross-section of stakeholders participated in the ESM, including: members of the four Add Us In consortia; local and national chambers of commerce; disability and minority advocacy groups; local workforce development agencies; private businesses; and Federal agencies. This paper captures themes that emerged from the ESM dialogue and presents next steps for ODEP and its partners to consider moving forward.

In the end, two themes emerged from the dialogue: 1. ***Prepping the Pipeline for a Skilled Workforce*** and 2. ***Supporting Small Businesses in Building an Inclusive Workplace***. Additionally, the conversation reinforced the importance of *Cultivating Collaborative Opportunities Among Stakeholders* to advance Add Us In’s goals and ultimately support systems

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of a “small” (with regard to the size of the business) is as determined by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) regulations addressing business size standards (13 CFR Part 121).

<sup>2</sup> Systems change is defined as impacting systems by increasing capacity, coordination, and dissemination to improve service delivery, processes, and policies that are related to disability, as well as improving the access to several different types of resources (e.g., funds, staff, time, resources, policies, procedures) for people with disabilities.

change within the workforce development system<sup>3</sup>. Participants emphasized that the key to developing effective, holistic policies and sustainable practices to enhance small businesses' ability to employ a diverse workforce that is inclusive of people with disabilities is grasping an understanding of multiple attitudes, changing misperceptions, and leveraging perspectives of stakeholders.

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## **BACKGROUND & PURPOSE**

*"We started Add Us In because we know that small businesses are fueling our economy. Given this opportunity, one of the priority goals of the Add Us In initiative is to create business engagement models that can be replicated on a national scale."* - Kathleen Martinez, Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP) provides national leadership in disability employment policy by influencing policies and promoting effective practices that ensure today's workforce is inclusive of all people, including people with disabilities. ODEP's vision is a world in which people with disabilities have unlimited employment opportunities. In 2010, the overall unemployment rate for people with a disability was 14.8 percent, significantly higher than the rate for those with no disability (9.4 percent). In addition, a large proportion of those with a disability – about 8 in 10 – were not in the labor force at all, compared with 3 in 10 of those with no disability.<sup>4</sup>

To help create unlimited opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities, in 2010, ODEP sponsored Add Us In - an initiative designed to identify and develop strategies to increase employment opportunities within the small business community for people with disabilities. Small business is the engine of U.S. economic growth, and the data on minority business growth shows that minority-owned and operated firms are significant contributors to the long-term health of the United States economy. Over the past 10 years, minority-owned businesses have grown at approximately double the rate of all firms in the U.S. economy.<sup>5</sup> If one considers the growth of additional small businesses such as those owned and operated by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; women; veterans; and people with disabilities, then the influence of these businesses is even greater.

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<sup>3</sup> Workforce development system is defined as a network of public and private organizations, agencies, services, programs and investments with a shared goal of improving and increasing competitive and sustainable employment.

<sup>4</sup> Persons with a Disability Labor Force Characteristics Summary. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency. (2006). The state of minority business enterprises: An overview of the 2002 survey of business owners. Retrieved from <http://www.mbda.gov/minoritybizfacts/StateofMinorityBusiness2002SurveyofBusinessOwners.pdf>.

Given this level of growth in the small business community, four Add Us In consortia were funded to encourage systems change within the workforce development system<sup>6</sup> to increase the capacity of the small business community to hire people with disabilities. Inciting such change will involve identifying research areas, developing policies, building relationships, and promoting exemplary practices. Consortium members include representatives of business associations, including small business associations, as well as disability-, youth-, adult-, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-serving organizations.

The Add Us In consortia are led by the following organizations:

[The University of Missouri-Kansas City in Kansas City, Missouri](#)

[The Community Partners-Integrated Recovery Network in Los Angeles, California](#)

[The Workplace Inc. in Bridgeport, Connecticut](#)

[The University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma](#)

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## DISCUSSION

On February 23, 2011 ODEP convened an Expert Strategy Meeting (ESM) in Washington, D.C. The ESM provided an opportunity to initiate a discussion and exchange ideas related to the current disability and diversity employment landscape and to identify strategic, inclusive approaches to diversify workplaces. The questions addressed by the group during the ESM included the following:

- How are diversity, disability, and business cultures intertwined? Where could connections be stronger?
- What are the barriers to weaving these cultures together?
- In proposing systems change in the workforce system, what can businesses; associations; educational institutions; ally groups; and Add Us In consortia do to support efforts toward greater diversity in the workforce, including disability?

Participants were highly engaged with the subject matter and expressed the need to mobilize research, policy, and evidence-based practices to create replicable models and strategies that can be used nationwide to help small businesses expand diversity workplace efforts to include disability and, ultimately, increase competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The discussion focused on two broad themes:

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<sup>6</sup> Workforce development system is defined as a network of public and private organizations, agencies, services, programs and investments with a shared goal of improving and increasing competitive and sustainable employment.

- ***Prepping the Pipeline for a Skilled Workforce***, which included exploration of the role of education in career preparation for youth; and
  - ***Supporting Small Businesses in Building an Inclusive Workplace***, which included gaining a better understanding of small business dynamics to identify innovative strategies that address the needs of small businesses while leveraging skilled workers with disabilities.
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## **PREPPING THE PIPELINE FOR A SKILLED WORKFORCE**

*“We need to start in education, making sure people will be gainfully employed. The Department of Education’s role is to infuse the disability cultures within general education. We need to become one system of education where we meet the needs of any child, whether it is a child with a disability or not. The senior year of high school is too late and discussions need to take place at a minimum in middle school. The transition in middle school needs to include a plan not only for a job but also around a career or post-secondary education.”* - Alexa Posny, Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education

Discussion at the ESM focused heavily on the current shortage of highly skilled workers to meet the demands of the overall labor market. To attain and sustain our country’s global economic advantage, it is vital that people – with and without disabilities – are prepared to enter the workforce. This concept of “prepping the pipeline” is critical to business success because, without a pool of qualified workers from which to hire, small businesses will face crucial human capital challenges.<sup>7</sup>

ESM participants discussed the essential nature of career preparation and work-based learning experiences - especially for youth. Young people with and without disabilities need these experiences in order to form and develop aspirations and to make informed choices about careers. These experiences can be provided during the school day or through after-school programs. In order to provide and promote such experiences, collaboration with other organizations is often required.

Participants noted that workforce entry is not a sudden overnight accomplishment for any individual in the labor market. Today, preparing an individual for the workforce is a process that takes education, skills training, and academic and career planning. This process can occur at any age and is not unique to people with disabilities. This transformation of the labor market, where individuals continuously transition in and out of the workforce, necessitates a system that allows for lifelong learning and skill development opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency. (2006). The state of minority business enterprises: An overview of the 2002 survey of business owners. Retrieved from <http://www.mbda.gov/minoritybizfacts/StateofMinorityBusiness2002SurveyofBusinessOwners.pdf>

Many attendees noted that workforce preparation is typically thought of as in- and out-of-school training and development, but it also involves high expectations and community involvement in addition to classroom education. Unfortunately, these expectations and supports are often lacking. Every individual in a young person's life, include family members, teachers, service providers, employers, and policymakers, all have a role to play in preparing the pipeline of skilled, credentialed job seekers. Further, work-based learning opportunities such as job shadowing, mentorships, and internships are good ways for employers to take an active part in providing opportunities and high expectations for potential workers.

Finally, it was also recognized that a lack of high expectations directly impacts a person with a disability's total quality of life along with his/her ability to find meaningful, integrated employment. Improved education and training opportunities are part of a systemic approach to enabling people to attain independence and live a productive life.

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## **SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESSES IN BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE**

*“Small businesses need to reorient themselves on hiring, meaning that they're looking for people who can meet their immediate need. And oftentimes they're not thinking ‘How can I integrate diverse people and cultures into my workforce?’” - Mary Olushoga, Program Manager at Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence.*

Why should businesses – particularly small businesses – hire people with disabilities? Participants recounted that local chambers of commerce have a strong desire to see research on the business case for hiring people with disabilities. They wanted to know about the benefits of initiating and sustaining disability hiring, which includes information on employee productivity, retention, and positive employment outcomes for companies who hire people with disabilities. While some employers may hire people with disabilities for reasons of corporate social responsibility, the primary reason for hiring within a small business is to employ the “best” person for the job. Decision-making criteria about who is the “best” varies from employer to employer, and may include factors such as retention, productivity, customer service, and return on investment. Mary Olushoga from Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence mentioned a business success story that resonated with participants. She highlighted an example from one of Count Me In's clients. This particular client demonstrated business success while creating an inclusive workplace by employing people with disabilities. She was one of 10 winners in the 2010 nationwide Make Mine a Million \$ Business competition. Pertzborn-Whiting is applying for a \$2.5 million Small Business Administration loan and lining up investors to raise another \$1 million. She plans to buy more business equipment and hire 25 employees, up to 10 of them with disabilities, a tribute to her 19-year old daughter who has a developmental disability. ESM participants pointed to the need for more examples of small businesses that have adopted effective disability hiring practices as well as demonstrated data on the return of investment.

In looking at the larger picture, some participants noted that many big businesses are leading the way in terms of establishing inclusion policies that recognize the importance of having a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities. They have the capacity, expertise, and know-how to implement best practices that allow for strategic integration. Therefore, they believe that there is a major role and opportunity for large companies to assist and influence small businesses in their hiring and inclusion practices. An example of where such influence could be applied is through diversity supplier programs, whereby companies create a diverse supplier and contractor base for their supply chain and procurement needs. Many diversity supplier programs are designed to ensure that businesses of diverse backgrounds and ownership have the opportunity to become valued suppliers. The small businesses that become a part of the supplier program gain economic benefits while simultaneously promoting corporate social responsibility for the large company. Further, diversity supplier programs foster healthy competition between the suppliers.

ESM participants also questioned the effectiveness of existing disability hiring incentives, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. The conversation focused on whether the lack of broad-scale usage within the business community was due to the lack of effectiveness of the hiring incentives themselves, the lack of knowledge of these hiring incentives among the business community, or the administrative burden associated with the usage. Also key to the discussion was an exploration of diversity business issues and the need for businesses to group disability with broader diversity efforts. This could be a promising strategy. In the current business landscape, workforce diversity is becoming a competitive necessity and a strategic goal for top-level businesses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to *Global Diversity and Inclusion: Perceptions, Practices and Attitudes*, a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) study conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) released June 2009, 86 percent of those companies surveyed had moderate to very strong diversity and inclusion programs. Indeed, the Add Us In initiative can parallel other workplace diversity efforts while bringing disability issues into the fold. It was suggested that outreach efforts not only highlight hiring incentives, but also demonstrate the benefits of community economic growth and the dividends of fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce.

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## **SHIFTING THE PARADIGM OF WORKPLACE DIVERSITY TO BE INCLUSIVE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: CULTIVATING COLLABORATION**

*“As a nation, we really cannot afford to leave any community behind, particularly a community with nearly 20 million people in the workforce and many more who are ready, willing, and capable of entering that workforce. Simply put, people with disabilities must be included in diversity: how you analyze diversity, in how you count diversity, in how you measure diversity, and in how you improve diversity. Diversity is and should be all-encompassing.”* – Kareem Dale, Associate Director, White House Office of Public Engagement & Special Assistant to the President on Disability Policy

Considerable discussion at the ESM centered on an underlying theme of cultivating collaboration as a key to shifting the paradigm of workplace diversity to be inclusive of people with disabilities. Many participants believed that systems change would involve changing misperceptions about people with disabilities and broadening the notion of workforce diversity.

Comments and personal anecdotes about stigma and discrimination permeated the discussion, along with an acknowledgement that many larger issues stem from underlying negative attitudes toward people with disabilities. Participants noted that a demonstrated way to dispel these negative attitudes is through open discussion, communication, education, and interaction.

Given that one of the Add Us In initiative's objectives is to broaden diversity efforts to be inclusive of people with disabilities from underrepresented and historically excluded groups, attendees felt it important to identify key partners to have a broader national conversation about how disability employment policy has an impact on other systems and policies related to education, criminal justice, social security, to name a few and vice versa. In addition, participants suggested that through teamwork and connections made with local entities and universities with research capabilities, these systems and programs could directly reach the community. It was felt that cultivation of collaboration must start at the national level because disability is a crosscutting issue for the Departments of Labor, Commerce, Education, Justice, and others. Experts recognized, however, that this collaboration must also be replicated at the local, grassroots level in order to make an impact.

Meeting participants cited several strategies designed to foster collaboration at the national and local level. They noted that building a "coalition of the willing" – a coalition comprised of people already supportive of disability and diversity workforce issues – is critical to starting a successful program. They also felt that it is vital to ensure top-down, executive branch-led support for collaborative initiatives and to pursue long-term programs that take into account diverse stakeholders. The experts recommended a multi-pronged approach, where various stakeholders educate their own constituencies and collaborate to ensure that decision makers understand that workplace diversity and inclusion are practices that they want and need to implement. Parties should collaborate to identify and promote success stories about diversity employment. Further, some participants suggested strong awareness that certain initiatives need to be employer-driven in order to have the most impact.

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## DISCUSSION THEMES AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing from this discussion the remainder of this report provides ideas that emerged from the dialogue for further exploration. They reflect approaches for prepping the pipeline for a skilled workforce and supporting small businesses in building an inclusive workplace.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS		POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS	SUGGESTED PARTNERS
<b>Prepping the Pipeline for a Skilled Workforce</b>	<p>Examine the issue of transition for all youth, including youth with disabilities from diverse communities, and its impact on obtaining and sustaining competitive employment.</p>	<p>Highlight the latest transition research, the pathways and potential pitfalls that confront youth exiting secondary education settings, and the policies and programs that exist to support youth into adulthood.</p> <p>Demonstrate the importance of setting high expectations and providing opportunities such as job shadowing, mentorships, and internships. Point out how every individual, from policymakers to employers, can play a role in ensuring better outcomes for youth.</p> <p>Look at how the issue of identifying individuals, including multiple identities such as economic status, race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, experience, and belief, can impact self-perception and influence people's access to information and employment opportunities; their roles in and treatment by organizations and by other individuals; their goals for economic and social independence; and the kinds and sources of information they find to be credible and useful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Department of Labor, Education, Commerce, Justice, and Social Security Administration</li> <li>● Diversity and Disability Councils</li> <li>● Students</li> <li>● Parents</li> <li>● Teachers</li> <li>● Schools</li> <li>● State Departments of Education, Labor, and Justice</li> <li>● Chambers of Commerce</li> <li>● Businesses</li> <li>● Employers</li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Supporting Small Businesses in Building an Inclusive Workplace</b></p>	<p>Highlight changing demographics within this nation and how its economic health is increasingly reliant on small businesses.</p>	<p>Identify specific examples of small business owners who have had experiences with hiring, retaining and promoting individuals with disabilities, including returning veterans, and share their personal story.</p> <p>Gain an understanding of how disability is an important part of a business' diversity plan and highlight significant benefits that can increase retention, return on investment, and innovation in the workplace.</p> <p>Examine how the availability of community supports, access to health and transportation resources, and expectations of family and friends all impact the opportunity for economic and social independence of people with disabilities; review how these elements impact the connection between a jobseeker with a disability and successful recruitment, hiring, and retention.</p> <p>Gather best practices seen within corporate diversity supplier practices; share these practices with other corporations and large companies; provide pathways for more diverse small business to become connected to diversity supplier programs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Department of Labor, Education, Commerce, and Small Business Administration</li> <li>• Diversity and Disability Advocacy Groups</li> <li>• American Council on Education</li> <li>• Chambers of Commerce</li> <li>• Disability advocacy groups</li> <li>• Institutions of higher education</li> <li>• Association of American Colleges &amp; Universities</li> <li>• National Association of Community Colleges</li> <li>• Employers</li> <li>• Small business associations</li> <li>• National Association of Colleges and Employers</li> </ul>
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## CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Participants in the ESM expressed a strong desire to see a research and evaluation component for the Add Us In initiative to demonstrate to small businesses the business case for hiring people with disabilities. Success stories and innovation from programs were also identified as a possible impetus for small businesses to seek out such future endeavors. Additionally, several participants emphasized that the initiative should work with other sectors such as education; housing; transportation; and health care to improve coordination of efforts to amplify public services that

ultimately help prepare people with disabilities as they transition to the workplace as well as encourage small businesses to hire people with disabilities.

In the end, the dialogue at the ESM had a unique and diverse mix of participants who provided their individual opinions and helped develop a foundation for moving Add Us In forward by identifying possible solution areas and actionable steps to help improve competitive employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The overall sense in the room was that the ESM discussion was an exciting first step. Participants were pleased to hear about ODEP's interest in holding an Add Us In National Diversity Forum, which will be convened in August 2011, in Washington D.C. This forum will be the first public dialogue on Add Us In and will allow for continued discussion, further identification of policies and strategies, and an opportunity to demonstrate models of success.

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## ***APPENDIX A: Participant in Attendance***

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) under the leadership of Assistant Secretary Kathleen Martinez acknowledges the dedication, time, expertise, and energy of the following people whose efforts resulted in an informative, insightful, and collaborative Expert Strategy Meeting.

### **\*Speaker/Panelist**

### **\*\*Facilitator**

#### **Susan Au Allen**

President & CEO  
U.S. Pan Asian American Chamber of  
Commerce

#### **Day Al-Mohamed**

Senior Policy Advisor  
U.S.. Department of Labor, Office of  
Disability Employment Policy

#### **\*Janet Baker**

Workforce Director/Add Us In Grantee  
Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce

#### **Susanne Bruyere**

Assistant Dean & Professor of Disability  
Studies  
Cornell University Industrial and Labor  
Relations School

#### **Kelly Buckland**

Executive Director  
National Council on Independent Living

#### **\*\*Ted Childs**

Principal  
Ted Childs LLC

**Florence Clark** Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA  
Associate Dean, Chair, and Professor/ Add  
Us In Grantee  
University of Southern California, School of  
Occupational Therapy

#### **Rebecca Cokley**

Director of Priority Placement  
White House

#### **Sarah Crawford**

Director of Workplace Fairness  
National Partnership for Women and  
Families

#### **Kareem Dale**

Associate Director  
White House Office of Public Engagement  
& Special Assistant to the President on  
Disability Policy

#### **\*\*Deborah Dagit**

Chief Diversity Officer  
Merck

#### **Curtis Decker**

Executive Director  
National Disability Rights Network

#### **Mary Dolan**

Senior Advisor Director of Public Policy  
National Organization on Disability

#### **Alison Gill**

Public Policy Associate  
Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network

#### **Patricia Gill**

Senior Program Associate  
Center for Workforce Development

Institute for Educational Leadership

**Claudia Gordon**

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Federal  
Contract Compliance Programs

**\*\* Steve Hanamura**

President  
Hanamura Consulting, Inc.

**\*Seth Harris**

Deputy Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor

**Gerrie Hawkins**

Senior Program Analyst  
National Council on Disability

**Anne Hirsh**

Co-Director  
Job Accommodation Network

**Pete Homer**

President & CEO  
National Indian Business Association

**\*Jill Houghton**

Acting Executive Director  
Membership & Partnership Opportunities  
U.S. Business Leadership Network

**Andy Imparato**

Senior Counsel and Disability Policy  
Director  
U.S. Senate Health Education Labor and  
Pensions Committee

**Kevin Jennings**

Assistant Deputy Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education

**Dave Lenox**

VP Leadership Development and Education  
Special Olympics

**Brandon Macsata**

Managing Partner  
The Macsata-Kornegay Group, Inc.

**\*Kathleen Martinez**

Assistant Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor, Office of  
Disability Employment Policy

**Kamilah Martin-Proctor**

Founder  
Martin M.S. Alliance Fund

**Susan Mazrui**

Director of Public Policy  
AT&T Services Inc.

**\*Jason McCall**

Special Assistant to the National Director  
U.S. Department of Commerce

**Donna Meltzer**

Senior Director of Government Affairs  
Epilepsy Foundation

**Mark Misrok**

President of Board of Directors  
National Working Positive Coalition

**GeMar Neloms**

Director of Professional Development  
National Youth Employment Coalition

**\*Justin Nelson**

President and Co-Founder  
National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of  
Commerce

**Jane Oates**

Assistant Secretary  
U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and  
Training Administration

**\*Mary Olushoga**

Program Manager

Count Me In for Women's Economic  
Independence

**Lou Orsleue**

Co-Director  
Job Accomodation Network

**Laura Owens**

Executive Director  
Association for Persons in Supported  
Employment

**Alexa Posny**

Assistant Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education, Office of  
Special Education and Rehabilitative  
Services

**Susan Prokop**

Associate Advocacy Director  
Paralyzed Veterans of America

**Curtis Richards**

Director  
Center for Workforce Development  
Institute for Educational Leadership

**Tracie Saab**

Project Manager  
Campaign for Disability Employment

**\*Robin Shaffert**

Senior Director of Corporate Social  
Responsibility  
American Association of People with  
Disabilities

**Marsha Temple**

Executive Director/Add Us In Grantee  
Integrated Recovery Network

**\*Derrick Willis**

Project Director/ Add Us In Grantee  
Institute for Human Development,  
University of Missouri Kansas City

**\*Addison Witt**

Personnel Manager  
Witt Entertainment Management/CEO