



August 25, 2006

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Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management  
United States Department of Labor  
Center for Program Planning and Results  
Room S-3317  
200 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20210

RE: Comments on the Draft Strategic Plan FY 2006-2011, FR. Doc 06-6685

The National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) is the nonprofit membership organization for the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Systems and Client Assistance Programs (CAP) for individuals with disabilities. Collectively, the P&A/CAP network is the largest provider of legally based advocacy services to people with disabilities in the United States.

While NDRN applauds the Department of Labor for its continued commitment to ensuring the competitiveness of our nation's workforce and supports the four broad strategic goals envisioned in the Draft Strategic Plan, we must express sincere disappointment with the draft's noticeable omission of meaningful, performance driven strategies and goals addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities. Over 20 million Americans between the ages of 21 and 64 report having a disability, comprising nearly 15% of our country's available workforce. DOL's omission of any strategic activity to increase this group's workforce engagement, as measured by workforce participation rates, is unacceptable for an agency which aspires to "make sure that no group is left behind"(p. 9).

We agree that greater participation of people with disabilities would cause the workforce to grow (p. 3) and are pleased to support the Department in its efforts to achieve this end. However, whereas DOL provides strategic, measurable goals and subsequent accountability for labor force participation for a number of highlighted populations, it outlines no such goals for persons with disabilities. Nor does the draft recognize that individuals with disabilities are a significant percentage of several target groups identified for strategic engagement, i.e.: at-risk and out-of-school youth, and the ex-offender population.

We strongly encourage the Department to reconsider this draft and revise it to include meaningful strategies - measured in terms of workforce participation - to meet the workforce preparation, attachment, and advancement needs of Americans with disabilities.

For example:

P. 3 – last paragraph. – DOL anticipates greater participation in the workforce by "older workers...*persons with disabilities* and other groups with previously low labor force participation..." – but the rest of the strategic plan reflects little to no consideration for addressing the employment concerns of people with disabilities – unlike some of the other groups mentioned in that lead paragraph.

P. 9 – 2<sup>nd</sup> full paragraph. – The lead sentence mentions a number of groups that face "unique" workforce challenges, however individuals with disabilities, a group that faces the greatest barriers to employment, is missing.

P. 10 – The plan discusses DOL's plans for young people, and for "developing innovative strategies and programs for women", but once again fails to mention individuals with disabilities.

P. 10 – 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph. – While several DOL agencies are mentioned relating to "supporting the strategic goal for a prepared workforce", the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is noticeably absent.

P. 11 – 14 – These pages describe various performance goals under Objective 1: A Prepared Workforce outlining attention to Job Corps students who, in addition to vocational training, will receive "housing, transportation, and family support resources"; discusses delivery of youth services through WIA youth programs; describing programs to aid ex-offenders "in successful reintegration into the community"; and improving One Stop Career Center services for veterans. There are however, no separate performance goals for employment of people with disabilities under this Objective. The last paragraph states "DoL is developing and implementing State Workforce Agency performance standards to improve employment outcomes for veterans." A similar goal should be included regarding the development and implementation of state workforce agency standards for people with disabilities.

P. 23 – Middle paragraph. The paragraph begins with discussion of goals and initiatives to support "A Competitive Workforce" – this is the only the first mention of ODEP among other agencies supporting this part of the plan. Reference to disability policy should be found throughout the plan.

P. 24 – Under Performance Goal 2C – "Improve outcomes for job seekers and employers who receive One-Stop employment and workforce information services." It is noted that One Stops are funded "principally through WIA, Wagner Peyser and Title 38 programs..." Vocational Rehabilitation funding should also be mentioned. Moreover, this performance

goal says nothing about improving One-Stop outcomes for people with disabilities, a long-standing policy and programmatic issue.

P. 25 – Performance Goal 2F pertains to older workers and makes reference to "strengthening the efforts of the workforce investment system to integrate the full spectrum of services available to older workers..." A similar statement should be made regarding workers with disabilities.

P. 26 – Performance goal 2H speaks to addressing the worker shortage through the Foreign Labor Certification Program. The degree that foreign labor is necessary directly relates to adequate preparation, training and hiring of Americans with disabilities. Failure to recognize this link points further to the absence of this population within the strategic plan draft.

P. 27 – Performance goal 2I – The draft performance standard for ODEP is extraordinarily weak and may ultimately have no correlation with employment outcomes. The performance standard should measure the number of people with disabilities who go to work in positions with benefits and good wage.

P. 35 – 37 – Goal 3 - Safe and Secure Workplace – This describes a number of laws, and on p. 36 refers to DOL's responsibility to assure that federal contractors and subcontractors do not discriminate. DOL has reportedly recovered over \$45 million on behalf of 14,000+ workers discriminated against in FY 2005. Data on the number of individuals with disabilities affected by such discrimination should be disaggregated, and disability discrimination goals and measures developed.

P. 58 – 60 – Management Initiatives – This describes a variety of efforts being undertaken by DOL to develop the senior level federal workforce of the future. Is DOL looking at this initiative, and that of other federal agencies under Schedule A authority to bring aboard talented mid and upper level managers with disabilities and if so, are their specific goals and activities that should be included in the Strategic Plan?

Because individuals with disabilities are served and/or affected by ~~the~~ programs in every division of DOL (ETA, VETS, BLS, etc), it is incumbent that each division of DOL have measurable objectives and related strategies relating specifically to the employment needs of individuals with disabilities. Such strategies should include, but not be limited to:

- the improvement of outcomes for job seekers with disabilities who receive One-Stop employment and workforce information services;
- the monitoring, assessment, and action taken to ensure physical and programmatic accessibility to the One-Stop Career Center System;
- the inclusion and active participation of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in supporting the strategic goals for a prepared workforce;
- the availability of accurate employment statistics for individuals with disabilities and various subgroups;

- the expansion of strategies designed for at-risk and out-of-school youth to specifically include youth with disabilities in this group;
- the expansion of strategies designed for ex-offenders to re-enter the workforce to include individuals with disabilities; and,
- the hiring and advancement of individuals with disabilities within the Department to meet the agency's future workforce needs as envisioned by Executive Order 13163.

NDRN appreciates this opportunity to provide comment on the Department's Draft Strategic Plan and would welcome the opportunity to work with DOL as it continues this evaluative process. Please feel free to contact me at (202) 408-9514 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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