



MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN:

Virginia's Cross-System Accessibility Taskforce Addresses Equal Opportunity and Access

March 2019

SYSTEM INNOVATION BRIEF

The State of Virginia began working with the National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD Center) in 2016. Leadership from key agencies, charged with developing and implementing the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan, came together to form a cross-agency Accessibility Taskforce. With support from the LEAD Center, this Taskforce designed and implemented multiple innovative practices to improve physical, programmatic, and communication accessibility within the workforce development system, using the [*Promising Practices in Achieving Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity: A Section 188 Disability Reference Guide*](#) to guide their work and their approach to the certification of their American Job Centers (AJCs). This brief details the LEAD Center's work with the state of Virginia, the strategic direction they chose, their approaches and strategies to building infrastructure to support Equal Opportunity, and what they learned along the way. The brief ends with suggested Action Steps, which can be implemented by other systems, and useful Resources.

I. VIRGINIA LEADERSHIP DRIVES AN INCLUSIVE MESSAGE: ACCESS IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCESS IS FOR EVERYONE

The Virginia's Workforce Development structure started with their newly elected Governor, who promoted an economy that works for everyone, no matter who they are or where they live. The Governor appointed a Chief Workforce Adviser, who was charged with coordinating an array of state programs to prepare Virginians with the skills required by employers for new technical fields, and for more traditional jobs the state was struggling to fill with qualified workers.

The Virginia Board of Workforce Development worked closely with the Governor and his Chief Workforce Advisor to provide strategic leadership and policy direction to the 15 designated local workforce development areas. Their WIOA Combined State Plan included input from state entities beyond the WIOA Title Programs, such as diverse community-based agencies. The combination of leadership committed to inclusion along with diverse input from cross-system partners, led to a state approach that emphasized equal opportunity and universal design.

Virginia adopted an inclusive and collaborative approach, building on their existing infrastructure

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and partnerships. They leveraged promising practices from previous efforts, such as the Disability Program Navigator (DPN) and Disability Employment Initiative (DEI), which had helped to expand access and increase outcomes for all customers. As a result, two main principles of accessibility guided the state's work:

1. Access to the workforce system is everyone's responsibility.
2. Access to the American Job Centers (AJCs) is for everyone.

For Virginia, there were many challenges to sustain these efforts that promoted accessibility. However, longstanding collaborations with diverse workforce partners and motivated leadership at state and local levels helped to maintain the focus on access for everyone as the hallmark of customer service in the WIOA system. Leadership from the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) was critical as well, since DARS was at the center of multiple other cross-system systems change initiatives.

II. WIOA SECTION 188: SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN VIRGINIA'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM

When Virginia partners wrote their WIOA Combined State Plan, they created an Accessibility Taskforce to enhance the customer service experience. The WIOA Title I Administrator at the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) assumed a lead role, setting the tone and communicating that, if accessibility is everyone's responsibility, VR should not be solely responsible; this must be a collaborative effort. This message also was emphasized at the local level so that individuals with disabilities were not being automatically referred to vocational rehabilitation (VR). Instead, they should be served effectively in AJCs and/or jointly served by AJCs and VR.

Using Virginia's WIOA Combined State Plan as a blueprint for the state's vision, the Virginia Community College System and VR jointly led the cross-partner committee to develop recommendations for physical, communication, and programmatic accessibility of the one-stop system in the state. During initial Taskforce deliberations, the state's DEI project played a crucial role in providing guidance and expertise around implementing promising practices in AJCs across the state.

In the early phase of the Taskforce, LEAD Center was invited to join the Virginia cross-agency Accessibility Taskforce to help everyone get to the same level of understanding around accessibility in the one-stop service delivery system. To set the foundation, LEAD presented on [*WIOA from a Disability Perspective: Implementing Section 188's Equal Opportunity Provisions*](#). Section 188 of WIOA prohibits discrimination against individuals who apply to, participate in, work for, or come into contact with programs and activities that receive financial assistance from U.S. Department of Labor, including partners that are part of the American Job Center delivery system. Section 188 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or political affiliation or belief, among other bases.

The regulations also require that reasonable accommodations be provided to qualified individuals with disabilities.

LEAD Center training included a snapshot of strategies collected nationally in a reference tool available to workforce partners nationwide. The tool, which was updated in 2019, is now called [*Promising Practices in Achieving Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity: A Section 188 Disability Reference Guide*](#), was jointly developed by the Civil Rights Center, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), with support and assistance from LEAD Center. This Section 188 Disability Reference Guide currently provides updated information and technical assistance (TA) that can help American Job Centers and their partners in the workforce development system meet the nondiscrimination and equal opportunity requirements for individuals with disabilities and others who experience barriers to employment, as reflected in WIOA's Section 188. This Reference Guide includes extensive examples of promising practices that promote equal access for individuals with disabilities in AJCs and through their partners.

III. VIRGINIA'S ACCESSIBILITY TASKFORCE: MODELING CROSS AGENCY COLLABORATION CENTERED ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND ACCESS

The LEAD Center was enlisted to provide ongoing technical assistance (TA) to Virginia's Accessibility Taskforce on WIOA's Section 188 Equal Opportunity provisions. This gave LEAD Center a critical window into state-level cross-partner deliberations and processes to improve accessibility. Through on-site and virtual support over the course of a year, LEAD Center staff assisted and supported the Taskforce in planning and facilitating an implementation plan with specific strategies and action steps. LEAD Center staff also supported the Taskforce with partner engagement, collaborative decision-making, defining of partner roles, and collective implementation of the state's overall vision and goals. The cross-partner group developed a shared vision and mission focused solely on accessibility, with input from workforce partners. They shared a commitment to working together as a team focusing on joint priority areas, including accessibility of all workforce system facilities, policies and procedures to support universal access, training for all workforce partners, and communication and outreach to customers with disabilities.

For the first time, Virginia convened a broad diverse representation of state agencies to focus solely on accessibility. The key strength of the Taskforce was its diverse representation, shared leadership, and determined commitment of its members. The group was and continues to be composed of staff across all WIOA Core partners, which includes 14 workforce programs and partners. In addition to VR, other agencies represented include the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Centers for Independent Living. As importantly, it was the first time the state Equal Opportunity Officers for WIOA Title I (Workforce Development) and Title III (Wagner Peyser) were invited to the table. The group also represented key state level workforce partners, including the Governor's Office for Workforce Development, the Community College's Workforce Development Services, and the Virginia Association of Workforce Directors. All members proved integral to developing solutions that

expanded equal access and opportunities for people across the spectrum of disabilities in the public workforce system.

The varying perspectives and vast subject matter expertise of Virginia's Taskforce members led to increased awareness of cross-agency opportunities for coordination of services and clarification of roles. The differing viewpoints and experiences shared by the members about their constituents led the group to take on challenging areas of access in the state workforce system, including sustainability of adaptive technology. One major accomplishment was a thorough review and update of all language within policies across workforce programs and partners to support compliance with the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) and Section 188 at both the state and local levels. Additionally, the group focused on improving the processes used by ADA surveying teams in reviewing physical accessibility as part of AJC Certification, including the development of an assessment process to review and improve programmatic and communication accessibility.

The importance of establishing a shared vision and mission was critical for this cross-partner taskforce, resulting in work and impact centered on accessibility. Their commitment to work together as a team, prioritize universal access, and delegate action steps for improvement proved most impactful. While leveraging expertise from VR and other diverse disability agencies has been essential in Virginia, they are committed to continuing to build on existing infrastructure, to encourage shared ownership among all partners, to foster systems integration through cross-agency collaboration at all levels, and to design services that are accessible from a customer's perspective.

IV. VIRGINIA'S ACCESSIBILITY TASKFORCE TAKES ON AJC CERTIFICATION WITH SECTION 188 AS THE FRAMEWORK

LEAD Center joined forces with the DEI to host a three-part webinar series on *AJC Certification and Section 188: A Window of Opportunity to Impact Equal Opportunity Policy & Practice for People with Disabilities*. The overall objective was to increase foundational knowledge of the intersection between WIOA's disability-related provisions, Section 188's Equal Opportunity regulations and AJC Certification, especially related to programmatic accessibility. The series presented state perspectives on the need to update and align state and local Section 188 compliance procedures and AJC Certification processes to reflect the expanded role of AJC Core Partners under WIOA. The series also offered the opportunity to learn about replicable strategies and action steps from states to support effective AJC Certification processes, with Section 188 as the framework. Additionally, these webinars highlighted the key roles of cross-systems partners in Section 188 and AJC Certification, including Equal Opportunity Officers and VR.

The three-part webinar series kicked off with an overview of the disability-related provisions in WIOA, with Section 188 as the framework for expanding access for individuals with disabilities, especially as it relates to the AJC Certification. Part I of the series, [WIOA from a Disability Perspective & Section 188: A Powerful Foundation for Access](#), highlighted the expanded roles of WIOA Core Partners (Title I, II, III, and IV) in complying with WIOA provisions as a part of their

shared responsibility for administering aspects of AJC service delivery. Presenters emphasized the critical resources and key partners that play major roles in supporting the workforce system to evaluate and improve programmatic access, leading to employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities.

Part II of the webinar series, [*State Workforce Systems that Are Making Equal Opportunity a Priority: Missouri, Virginia, and California*](#), spotlighted several states, including Virginia, in which they shared motivations, strategies, challenges, and actions in implementing effective AJC Certification procedures. Virginia provided an overview of their Accessibility Taskforce, describing it as a diverse, action-oriented committee that is influencing policy, clarifying roles of partners, and leveraging promising practices from the state's DEI to improve programmatic access and outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

As part of Virginia's panel presentation, several members of the Virginia's Taskforce described their experiences as part of the cross-partner team specifically focused on accessibility. One policy administrator for Title I described the work on the Taskforce as an eye-opening experience. From a policy perspective, the significance of being part of the group was initially understood because Title I must be represented. However, it was soon realized that the experience would build a much deeper level of understanding around accessibility. While there was a basic awareness of physical accessibility in Title I programs, the Taskforce provided members with the opportunity to expand their knowledge to create a more comprehensive and effective one-stop certification process.

Having a policy perspective guiding their work helped raise awareness of Title I programs, but it also allowed them to better use subject matter experts with operational experience. This proved essential to crafting statewide policy and supporting guidance documents. Cross-partner members on the Taskforce provided a practical application framework, helping members to correctly interpret and apply the large volume of information on accessibility under WIOA and develop an understanding of the issues at a granular level.

Since accessibility is a mandatory component of the one-stop center certification process, the Taskforce became a critical advisory group. The relationships developed on the Taskforce contributed to the design of the accessibility portion of the certification tool. Members gave feedback and addressed assistive technology questions. The networking opportunities within the Taskforce opened doors to new insights and promising practices, including the use of Integrated Resource Team (IRT) as a strategy that is being effectively deployed in some areas of the state. The varied perspectives and experiences of members helped to inform policy and practice. These Virginia partners are continuing to work together to craft more effective policy, through framing policy discussions with practical applications that enhance accessibility rather than merely "enforcing" it.

An example of improved policy-to-practice implemented by the Taskforce includes the development and passage of the state workforce board's [*Services to Individuals with Disabilities*](#), a policy that lays the groundwork for a consistent approach to Section 188 and ADA implementation across all WIOA programs. Previously, AJC accessibility had centered primarily

on physical access, without addressing programmatic accessibility. Because Taskforce members became an official part of the AJC certification process, members assisted in developing and vetting the criteria for the Physical and Programmatic Accessibility portion of the certification tool. They also participated in reviewing certification documentation. Currently, many members participate in on-site certification validation visits to the one-stops. Further, the Title 1 Administrator and VR Assistant Director jointly developed a Letter of Agreement with the Virginia Association for Centers for Independent Living, to finance and authorize them to conduct Accessibility Surveys for the AJCs, as part of the one-stop certification process. This has provided a statewide level of standardization and has relieved a fiscal and procurement burden on the local workforce development areas.

The final webinar in the series, [*Part III: Achieving 188 Compliance and AJC Certification: Key Strategies and Actions from Policy to Procedures*](#), provided a snapshot of the foundation set by WIOA's disability-related provisions and Section 188. All three states highlighted their most impactful strategies, including a discussion of which partners were essential to each region's Section 188 implementation and AJC Certification. Presenters identified action steps to help states assess where they fall along the spectrum of implementing Section 188 as a part of AJC Certification, as well as the steps they can take to improve physical and programmatic accessibility, build partnerships, and increase employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities.

V. MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN TO INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY IN YOUR STATE AND LOCAL WORKFORCE SYSTEM

Virginia's focus on Section 188 and ADA compliance is improving the effectiveness of their workforce system. The state leadership is not only committed to increasing awareness of accessibility at the state and local levels, but they also are creating technical assistance connections between the Taskforce members, local workforce board, and one-stop staff to pave the way for real change. WIOA presents an opportunity for all "title" programs to collaborate by moving forward together on accessibility issues. The value added of cross-agency engagement is paying off as other partners are joining accessibility discussions. As a result, Virginia has started a significant conversation that sets the stage for much deeper levels of change and understanding, as compared to merely completing a checklist for compliance.

Today, Virginia continues to strengthen and leverage the diverse partnerships of their Taskforce to keep a spotlight on accessibility. They continue to prioritize Section 188 and AJC Certification in the development of a statewide approach to universal access training. Ultimately, they are committing to working together to ensure that accessibility is everyone's responsibility and access is for everyone.

Where can you start? Learn about cross-systems committees that exist in your state and local regions. Explore if your state/local region has cross-systems committees in place and join. If Section 188 is not a topic at the table, invite state and local Equal Opportunity Officers (EOOs) and VR to the table, as well as diverse community-based organizations like the Commission for

the Blind, agencies that serve Deaf/hard-of-hearing, Centers for Independent Living, and other disability groups that have a presence in your region. Insert this brief and other resources, like the three-part webinar series noted in this brief, and the 188 Disability Reference Guide, into the discussion. Share that Section 188 is the regulatory framework for non-discrimination and equal opportunity for all customers and staff that WIOA programs touch.

Overall, partnerships are critical in implementing an effective Section 188 and AJC Certification process. Under WIOA, all core partners share some aspects of AJC service delivery and that means having a level of awareness of Section 188. Section 188, which is aligned with the ADA, both provide the foundation for AJC Certification. Leverage the expertise of EOs and VR. EOs are charged with implementing 188 compliance and VR is WIOA's subject matter expert in disability and accessibility. By seeking partnerships with diverse disability organizations, including those that serve the blind, Deaf, people with developmental disabilities and mental health disabilities, you can greatly expand accessibility, awareness, and outcomes in the workforce system.

VI. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[**WEBINAR SERIES: WIOA from a Disability Perspective & Section 188: A Powerful Foundation for Access**](#)

[**Three-Part Webinar Series: AJC Certification & Section 188: A Window of Opportunity to Impact Equal Opportunity Policy & Practice for People with Disabilities**](#)

[**LEADing to Employment Brief: Implementing the Equal Opportunity Provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(Section 188\)**](#)

[**Joint System Innovation Brief: WIOA Section 188 & AJC Certification: A Window of Opportunity to Impact Equal Opportunity Policy and Practice to Better Serve Individuals with Disabilities**](#)

[***Promising Practices in Achieving Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity: A Section 188 Disability Reference Guide***](#)