Oct. 1 marks the start of the National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). The U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy began celebrating NDEAM in 1945. People with disabilities continually face unemployment rates much higher than the national average. Each year, October is designated to highlight the importance of developing an inclusive workforce of individuals with a variety of abilities.

States have been hard at work to better utilize this underrepresented yet talented group of individuals. Through innovative research and policies, states can better recognize, train and employ skilled workers with disabilities.

In 2017, Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin created the Work Matters Task Force which CSG helped to facilitate. The task force was modeled after The National Task Force on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities. “Kentucky’s economy will be strongest by utilizing the talents of every Kentuckian in order to realize our vision for growth,” Bevin said in the task force report.

The task force addressed five populations: people with disabilities, veterans, foster youth, individuals with criminal records, and individuals with substance use disorders. The task force developed numerous specific policy options in response to overall goals. For example, an increased focus on employment barriers for people with disabilities was implemented. Policy options were created in all phases of the employment process such as preparing for work, transportation to work, job retention, and entrepreneurship. The task force members are currently working to set targets for labor force participation to gauge the success of their efforts as well as legislative action.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards ordered a Model Employer Task Force, similar to Kentucky’s efforts, to combat the workforce and poverty disparities of people with disabilities. The task force is required to establish a five-year plan with annual goals regarding employment of people with disabilities. The executive order also lists responsibilities for the head of each state agency that reports to the governor. Among the responsibilities is the designation of a staff person who oversees the creation, execution, and evaluation of strategies and the submission of a plan describing the policies adopted to meet the goals set by the order.

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) leads Ohio’s efforts in this area. OOD hosts career fairs across the state that link job seekers and employers. According to a report from OOD, over 270 people with disabilities found employment at these events last year. More than 175 employers are said to have already registered to partake in the job fairs this year.

Massachusetts takes a unique approach on tackling the problem as well. The Massachusetts Office on Disability and the Human Resource Division partner to provide opportunities for people with disabilities to explore career interests. They have created a mentorship program which allows people with disabilities to learn more about potential careers and develop connections with professionals in the field. At the same time, it allows employers to better understand how people with disabilities can play a role in their workforce.
Oregon state Rep. Gene Whisnant served on The National Task Force on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities which compiled the Work Matters Policy Framework that offers states program and policy options to enhance workforce inclusiveness. Whisnant’s work at the national level ignited an interest that he brought back to his state in a workgroup aiming to improve employment for people with disabilities. The House Workgroup on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities collaborated with CSG, the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) and the State Exchange on Employment and Disability (SEED) on the issue. The workgroup also included representatives from the Oregon Commission for the Blind, the Oregon Disabilities Commission, and the Oregon Supported Employment Center for Excellence. The all-encompassing workgroup is exploring policy solutions, affirmative language changes that prohibit discrimination of people with disabilities and plans to submit legislative placeholders for the upcoming session.

This issue is being prioritized at the federal level as well. President Trump released a proclamation recognizing NDEAM and sharing the work that his administration is doing in the area. In the proclamation, he highlights the initiatives of the Department of Labor and the impacts they are having. Last month, the Department of Labor awarded nearly $20 million in grants through RETAIN projects. RETAIN (Retaining Employment and Talent after Injury/Illness Network Demonstration) projects aim to enable people who are injured or ill to remain in or return to the workforce. The Department of Labor also developed the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion which provides employers assistance in recruiting and retaining workers with disabilities.

States nationwide are taking numerous approaches to meet the needs of employment for all citizens. As states continue to create an inclusive workforce, economies will grow, disparities will shrink, and the standard of living will improve.

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