



State Rehabilitation Council

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To: The office of Governor Brown

From: The Oregon State Rehabilitation Council

Subject: Response to the 10-Point Economic Recovery Plan

Dear Governor Kate Brown,

The Oregon State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) works to ensure Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is consumer-driven and that available programs, services, and resources resulting in competitive, integrated employment. The Governor-appointed members of the SRC represent various stakeholder groups and clients' perspectives as mandated in Sect 105 of the Rehabilitation Act. The 10-Point Economic Recovery Plan shows you understand barriers to employment faced by many underserved communities, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The SRC wants to commend you for taking such an active stance to include the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in your support for economic recovery. We also want to make sure Oregonians with disabilities are included in the efforts you are taking to address economic insecurity in our beautiful state.

Please accept the following as feedback and recommendations:

- In the overview, first paragraph, you state Communities of Color have been most impacted by the pandemic and wildfires. The SRC wants to recognize that this is certainly true and add that the disabled communities have also been severely impacted from loss of services, jobs, loss of access to providers, health care, and personal service workers who all suffered during the pandemic. The SRC invites you to review the [Easter Seals Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on People with Disabilities](#) published and released in May 2021. This study outlines the barriers to health care, employment, and services that place people with disabilities at even higher risk of unemployment, houselessness, and severe physical and mental health crisis.
- In response to Action #1: Investing in Oregon's hardest hit workers means investing in workers with disabilities. The unemployment rate for workers with

disabilities grew from 7.8% in January 2020 to 18.9% by April 2020. That unemployment rate had recovered to 12.5% by September. During that same time period, unemployment among persons without disabilities grew from 3.8% to 14.3% in April, before declining to 7.5% by September.¹ What those numbers show is that persons with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of the pandemic, because joblessness jumped by a greater percentage than it did for those without disabilities and has been slower to recover. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data also reveals key intersections between gender, BIPOC, and people with disabilities. The BLS reports, “Persons with a disability tend to be older than persons with no disability, reflecting the increased incidence of disability with age. In 2020, half of persons with a disability were age 65 and older, compared with 17 percent of those with no disability. Overall, women were somewhat more likely to have a disability than men, partly reflecting the greater life expectancy of women. In 2020, the prevalence of disability continued to be higher for Blacks and Whites than for Hispanics and Asians.”²

- In response to Action #2: Affordable and innovative housing must be accessible and supportive of persons with disabilities. Accessible and supportive housing means access to support care workers and social services, management educated and trained in ADA accommodations, and regulations that reduce discriminatory practices and increase availability to residents who are experiencing disabilities. Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) are already at high risk for houselessness and housing insecurity due to an inadequate investment in community-based, inclusive housing; aging parents who are losing their ability to physically and financially care for their adult children with disabilities; and a considerable employment gap between persons with disabilities and persons without disability. Recent research reports indicate 24,000 or more than three quarters of all individuals with IDD in Oregon and Southwest Washington may be at risk for houselessness in the coming years.³ With respect to individuals with traumatic brain injury, as many as 53% of people who experience houselessness may have a brain injury, and 23% of those brain injuries are moderate to severe.⁴ Stable and supportive housing enables people with disabilities to return to work,

¹ See McLaren, Christopher, and Taylor Rhodes, David Rosenblum, et al., “Employment for Persons with a Disability: Analysis of Trends During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020. Available at: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/ODEP_Employment-for-PWD-AnalysisofTrendsDuringCOVID_Feb-Sept.pdf

² See “Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics—2020,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, pp 1-2. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>

³ See “From Invisibility to Inclusion: Increasing Housing Options for People Experiencing Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,” The Kuni Foundation, 2020. Available at

⁴ See Hwang, Stephen W., and Angela Colantonio, Shirley Chlu, et al., “The Effects of Traumatic Brain Injury on the Health of Homeless People,” Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ), Oct. 7, 2008, p 782. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2553875/pdf/20081007s00017p779.pdf>

gain more independence, and increase quality of life. State funds and new federal funds from the American Rescue Plan should be targeted toward stabilizing the housing of renters with disabilities.

In order to stabilize housing for those individuals, the Governor should not only reinvest in innovative housing, but also invest more in community-based mental health treatment. Over capacity issues at the Oregon State Hospital continue to be a problem that leads individuals back to the street and re-incarceration.⁵ The shortage of community treatment options and law enforcement practices that target individuals with disabilities decrease the opportunities for housing stability for that population. About 50% of all Oregon prison inmates have been diagnosed with a mental illness or developmental disability.⁶ These convictions make it harder for people to access housing and they end up on the street. The City of Portland Homelessness Tool kit reports that 57% of the homeless population has a disability and 39% of the homeless population are BIPOC.⁷ Without targeted investment in affordable, innovative, and supportive housing for persons with disabilities, we will see an increase of BIPOC people with disabilities living in the streets. Employment goals cannot be achieved, if housing and health disparities among persons with disabilities continue to grow.

- In response to Action #3: Economic development strategies and investment in community colleges should be targeted toward persons with disabilities. People with disabilities in rural communities experience disparities accessing services that expand economic opportunity and enhance their employment options. The Vocational Rehabilitation offices that serve large rural district have many more miles of coverage and the least amount of job developers, job coaches, and job opportunities. Where VR has had successful placements in the past with agribusinesses, it is clear that this sector of employment benefits from diversity in employment and is welcoming to people with disabilities. Appropriate levels of funding and incentives supporting economic development and Oregon's agriculture economy should be targeted toward disability-owned agribusinesses and expanding competitive, integrated employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in agribusiness.
- In response to Action #4 and #5: Targeting investments in workforce development and supports to communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 should

⁵ Tilkin, Dan, "Oregon State Hospital 'in Untenable Position' with Patients," KOIN 6 News, June 1, 2021. Available at https://www.koin.com/news/oregon/oregon-state-hospital-in-untenable-position-with-patients/?fbclid=IwAR1QPVCTeyynOK3Lda8CgXeeba3PnuPrm5rB-ObL9nSOT5jy2jc_ioqjTCM

⁶ "Oregon State Population Health Indicators: State Profile on Incarceration," Oregon Health Authority, 2018. Available at <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/ABOUT/Documents/indicators/incarcerate.pdf>

⁷ "Homelessness Toolkit: Homelessness Statistics," City of Portland, 2015. Available at <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/toolkit/article/562207>

not only include BIPOC communities and women, but also workers with disabilities. As noted above in Action #1, workers with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by pandemic-related job losses, and those jobs have been slower to recover.

Expanding career pathways for persons with disabilities is critical in order to overcome the longstanding employment gap between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities. In 2019, Oregonians with disabilities ages 18 to 64 were employed at a rate of 44%, whereas persons without disabilities were employed at a rate of 78.3%, representing an employment gap of 34.2%.⁸ The pandemic period has only accelerated that employment gap, as workers with disabilities are employed in industries that have suffered the most.⁹ The proportion of workers with disabilities working part time because their hours had been reduced or because they are not able to find a full-time job is higher than for those without disabilities. Those with disabilities are also most underrepresented in management, professional, and related occupations, when compared to those without disabilities (36.1%, compared with 43.3%).¹⁰ For those reasons, targeted investment in new career pathways for individuals with disabilities should focus on ensuring full-time employment opportunities in management, professional, and related occupations.

For housing, see above in Action #2 which addresses the need for affordable, accessible, and supportive housing for people with disabilities. Additionally, due to the fact that persons with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of the pandemic, they are more likely to have accrued rental debt. As state agencies decide how to get state and federal rental assistance dollars in the hands of those most in need, heightened emphasis should be placed on providing that relief to tenants with disabilities, many of whom are at high risk of homelessness or are already among the state's population of nearly 5,000 "chronically homeless" individuals.¹¹ The HUD definition of "chronic homeless" means a person who has experienced homelessness for at least a year or repeatedly, while struggling with a disabling condition. With approximately \$500 million in funds newly allocated to the state for rental assistance, the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program (OERAP) should first target those payments to persons with disabilities, who are among the hardest hit and most vulnerable households.

⁸ "Annual Disability Statistics Compendium 2020," Institute on Disability, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics, 2020, Table 3.9, p 47. Available at <https://disabilitycompendium.org/>

⁹ See Newman, Andy, "'I Really Loved My Job': Why the Pandemic Has Hit These Workers Harder," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2021. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/nyregion/workers-disabilities-unemployment-covid.html>

¹⁰ See "Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics—2020," U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, p 2. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>

¹¹ "2019 Point-in-Time Dashboard," Oregon Housing and Community Services, 2020. Available at <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/oregon.housing.and.community.services/viz/2019Point-in-TimeDashboard/Story1>

The perspectives of the disability community must be included in developing policies for the use of program funds. Persons with disabilities and disability advocates should be represented on key advisory boards such as the Oregon Housing Stability Council.

In terms of supporting the caring economy, the need for skilled personal support workers (PSWs) is increasing as more disabled individuals are attempting to enter the workforce in order to meet their financial needs. PSWs must have a living wage, benefits, career advancement options, and appropriate training to be successful in supporting people with disabilities. Encouraging those workers and others to provide peer support services will also drastically increase access to community care services and employ people who cannot afford a full degree. More evidence is coming out about the successful work that peer support workers and personal support workers are able to accomplish in ways that other helping professionals in clinical settings are not able to accomplish. When PSWs are not paid or trained appropriately, there is a high turn-over rate, and that will create setbacks for the individuals they are working with. People with disabilities who use the services of PSWs need to have consistent and skilled care. Workers want these jobs, but the risks and hard work involved do not meet the pay grade for this kind of care work.

PSWs are essential workers and, like other essential workers in Oregon, their time should be compensated accordingly to give them incentives to stay at it and commit to the people they are serving. With the top pay range for this profession being a mere \$16 an hour, many of the people performing this work are struggling to make ends meet and cannot be fully present and supportive of their clientele when they cannot put food on their own tables or afford child care.

For BIPOC communities, being able to provide peer support work and personal service work in their own communities is a start to recovery for many people, both the care givers and receivers. Peer support services are proven to decrease hospitalizations, improve outcomes in mental health and addiction services, improve quality of life, increase access to resources, and reduce overall costs of services.¹² The Peer Support program at OSH is highly successful and that model can be used to create additional community care peer run respite services that should be fully funded by state dollars. Making sure that available funds are used to increase access to peer support and personal service worker training in the BIPOC communities should absolutely be a priority, along with community support service offices and peer respite care centers that could act as a buffer

¹² “Peer Support: Research and Reports,” Mental Health America, 2019. Available at <https://mhanational.org/peer-support-research-and-reports>

between full clinical residential programs and incarceration. When people get the help they need from others who understand and have been there, the community will build more trust and support and reduce the amount of money being spent in institutionalization of disabled people. Vocational Rehabilitation should be encouraged and rewarded for helping its consumers into these fields.

- Action #6: The SRC supports efforts to revitalize businesses that have been hurt by COVID-19 emergency mandates. Some of those businesses were also businesses that contract with VR to provide services like job development and coaching. Where there had been some action taken to attempt to compensate these providers at a different rate to keep them afloat during the pandemic, many of them closed their doors and workers found other types of work. This also relates to Action #4 in supporting the care giving economy.

Providing outreach and development for small businesses recovery should target disability-owned businesses. Regrettably, Oregon's Certification Office for Business Inclusion and Diversity (COBID) does not have a category for "Disability-owned Business Enterprise," although it does have a category for "Service-Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise" (SDVBE). Nonetheless, giving priority to COBID firms for outreach and development for businesses on the cusp of closing should reach businesses owned by persons with disabilities, as they are more likely to be among "Disadvantaged Business Enterprise," "Minority Business Enterprise," and "Women Business Enterprise," given the intersections between race, gender, and disability. They are also represented, in part, by the category of SDVBEs. In the long term, the state of Oregon should consider adding "Disability-owned Business Enterprise" as a distinct classification for purposes of providing public contracting opportunities.

- Action #7: Infrastructure updates including broadband networks, especially in rural communities, are critical to bridging the digital divide between those who have ready access to computers and the internet, and persons with disabilities who do not. As our economy continues to embrace more virtual work opportunities and work at home, a troubling digital divide correlated to individual's disability status may limit equal opportunities to employment. As a reasonable accommodation, remote work historically has been challenged and denied to persons with disabilities, and only more widely acceptable during the pandemic. Many jobs can be done from a home office with proper internet connections. This could increase job opportunities for many people with diverse disabilities from mobility to mental health, as working from a home setting allows for disability-related needs that may not be available in an office or business setting. We saw how hard it was for many rural communities to participate in online school and virtual work meetings due to

poor connections and lack of connections to internet. The SRC fully supports this action step and requests that, when looking at infrastructure, Oregon should also prioritize making business and roads ADA accessible because many are not up to standards for accessibility. This includes wheelchair accessibility, but also accessibility for people with other types of disabilities around vision, hearing, neurodiversity, and mental health.

- Action #8: In terms of implementing a BIPOC and hardest hit business strategy, see above in Action #6, which addresses the need for inclusion of “Disability-owned Business Enterprise” and changes to the COBID system, in order to expand business equity and contracting opportunities for persons with disabilities. As part of investing in Oregonian businesses, please be aware of and familiar with the opportunities that VR has around microenterprises. At this time, VR is working with consumers around small business strategies and helping people start their own gig work and small businesses. As things progress, it is predicted this will be in more demand and will need more concrete funding to the VR program to support these efforts.
- Action #9: As the state moves to safely reopen our economy, it should place a high priority on the considerations of persons with disabilities who are at heightened risk of complications due to COVID-19. Additionally, access to safe, affordable, and accessible transportation is necessary for all Oregonians including people with disabilities who often do not have the means to provide their own transportation. This leaves people with disabilities reliant on friends, family, or strangers for help getting to appointments or work, limiting opportunities for employment and access to care.
- Action #10: The focus on manufacturing will certainly bring jobs to Oregon and help businesses and workers. These types of jobs, historically, have been held by undereducated and impoverished workers, often immigrants and people with disabilities in unsafe working conditions. Workers with a disability are still more likely than those without a disability to work in production, transportation, and material moving occupations (14.9%, compared with 12.2%).¹³ Making sure these jobs are safe, pay a living wage in an integrated environment, and provide accommodations for people with disabilities is very important. Since the *Lane v. Brown* case and the requirements under the Workforce Opportunities and Innovations Act are very specific about working conditions for people with disabilities, especially the population of people with IDD, it is vital that these jobs be integrated and competitive for people with disabilities. The old ways of

¹³ See “Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics—2020,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, p 2. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>

sheltered workshops are no more, and lumping all people with IDD into one sector of manufacturing does a disservice to their unique strengths, capabilities, interests, and employment goals.

The SRC wants to thank you for taking the time to read, consider, and incorporate these details into your plan for economic recovery, making sure that the plan is inclusive for people with disabilities and reflects the intersectionality with BIPOC communities.