

## **BUSINESS LEADERSHIP NETWORKS: PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR MEDICAID INFRASTRUCTURE GRANTS**

Medicaid Infrastructure Grants (MIGs) are building sustainable state infrastructure to support people with disabilities in competitive employment, and they've learned that partnerships with businesses are crucial to their success. MIGs are exploring new strategies for success with businesses in outreach and education, relationship building and collaboration.

This is the third in a series of capacity building briefs that focus on working with the business community. The briefs are based on information shared by MIG staff at several NCHSD forums, including the April 12, 2006, Membership Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. The first brief—Building Partnerships with Business: Foundations for a Strong Beginning—presented states' ideas and advice on taking those important first steps to learn about the business community and establish new relationships. The second brief—Hands-On/How-To Strategies for Collaborating with Business—provides concrete, practical tips on how to begin partnering with businesses in the work of supporting and promoting employment for people with disabilities.

This third brief focuses on Business Leadership Networks, a leading model for business involvement in disability and employment issues. In many states, BLNs are a valuable element of MIG efforts to partner with businesses in promoting employment for people with disabilities. However, the BLN model is not the only business strategy MIGs can use, and it is not a model that suits every state or every community.

## Business Leadership Networks

This brief is designed to help MIG leaders decide if and when a Business Leadership Network strategy is right for their state. The brief explains what BLNs do and the role they play in achieving better employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Also addressed are the key prerequisites for developing a viable BLN and ways for MIGs to be involved. The brief also goes step-by-step through the process of starting a BLN, and the on-going work needed to maintain its success.

For those states where BLNs are NOT a viable strategy, the brief offers ideas for alternative approaches. These will be described in greater detail in an upcoming Business Brief.

### WHY SHOULD MIGS CONSIDER THE BLN MODEL?

The National Organization on Disability in its *2004 Harris Survey on Disability Trends* estimated that 65 percent of working age people with disabilities are unemployed; 63 percent of these individuals would prefer to work. At the same time, by 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that employers will face a workforce shortage of 10,000,000 workers as baby boomers retire in large numbers.

People with disabilities want to work and employers are searching for qualified, dedicated employees. Historically, government programs, schools and service providers have largely ignored business in their quest to expand the employment of people with disabilities. There has never been a better time to engage with businesses to connect qualified workers with disabilities and the employers who can benefit from their skills and abilities. BLNs can be the answer to facilitating this connection.

The BLN movement promotes employment of people with disabilities by encouraging employers to talk to each other about best practices and successes, rather than having a service provider or government agency encourage employers to hire. It is the power of the business network that makes the BLN model effective.

A Business Leadership Network is a business-to-business network created for the purpose of building awareness among employers of

#### ***The Power of BLNs***

In 2004, the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) set a 5-year goal to assure that more than 50 percent of those APD served in some type of day service were working in paid community jobs. As of this year, Florida has met 76 percent of its goal. The Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) also experienced increases in the number of people becoming gainfully employed or rehabilitated. Between FY2004-05 and 2005-06, the number of people becoming employed with DVR's assistance jumped from 9,345 to 10,796, the highest in five years. All six of Florida's BLN pilot sites showed an increase in the number of people with disabilities becoming employed, based on data from APD, DVR and the One-Stops. Florida is convinced its local BLNs are contributing to this increase.

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### WHAT EXACTLY IS A BUSINESS LEADERSHIP NETWORK?

the skills and abilities of people with disabilities. BLNs play a key role in sharing information among businesspeople about disability and employment and they seek to directly affect businesses' efforts to hire workers with disabilities.

The goals of a BLN are generally to dispel myths business people have about people with disabilities; encourage businesses to hire and retain employees with disabilities; and provide resources businesses need to do it. A typical mission statement for a BLN is: "The Business Leadership Network educates and encourages employers to recruit, hire, train and retain employees with disabilities as part of promoting good business practices."

BLN chapters are formed at the state, regional or local level, which are represented by the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN). The [USBLN website](http://www.usbln.org/default.aspx) (<http://www.usbln.org/default.aspx>) describes BLNs as:

"employer organizations that serve to raise awareness and remove attitudinal barriers to including people with disabilities through training and education. BLN chapters are led by employers who have discovered the value that individuals with disabilities bring to their workforce and have benefited from including them in their business diversity strategies."

#### **Local or State Level?**

Local BLN chapters are generally thought to be most effective in terms of engaging businesses and encouraging active business participation. This is because "all employment is local." Local chapters can respond to local business needs and interests, they offer a local network of fellow businesses, and they provide a more convenient place for businesspeople to meet. Statewide BLNs can play a useful role in conjunction with local chapters, for example, by supporting a website with resources for employers, developing and distributing informational packets, and making presentations at conferences and workshops. State-level BLNs can also be the catalyst for major statewide events, perhaps in partnership with local chapters.

USBLN reports that there are 43 BLN chapters in 32 states (including the District of Columbia); collectively they represent more than 5,000 businesses. You can find out if there is a BLN chapter in your state by [clicking here](#) or navigating to their website at: <http://www.usbln.org/chapters/chapters.aspx>.

BLN chapters generally have a "lead business," a company that has committed itself to supporting and guiding the chapter, which is usually done through the participation of a designated employee of the company. Local BLNs usually have a slate of officers elected by the members who serve as an executive committee.

Chapters may also have a state partner,

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such as Vocational Rehabilitation, the lead disability agency, Workforce Boards, the Developmental Disabilities Council or the Department of Labor. The state partner usually provides financial support; in some cases it may provide administrative or in-kind support and resources for meetings.

BLNs have a for-profit focus, and generally limit the number of non-profit and provider organizations that can join. In fact, the USBLN requires local chapters to have no more than 15 percent of their membership composed of organizations that provide employment services. This is considered important to make sure the BLN is a business-focused enterprise, rather than a forum to address provider or advocacy issues, however important they may be.

### WHAT DO BLNS DO, AND HOW DO THEY DO IT?

BLN chapters host a variety of meetings, events and other activities, providing a forum for exchanging information and expertise. Chapters typically hold regular meetings for their members that feature informative presentations as well as time for networking. Presentations are usually aimed to educate members about disability issues and share resources and experiences. Many chapters sponsor job fairs or training workshops, and some offer individualized on-site training on disability issues. A BLN might undertake to organize a paid internship program to encourage meaningful job opportunities for young people or others new to the workforce. Chapters often host websites and conduct outreach campaigns to encourage businesses to join the BLN and hire people with disabilities.

BLN chapters may have monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly meetings, depending on local businesses' interests and energy. A typical meeting might be a breakfast meeting lasting one to one-and-a-half hours long. It will usually have a learning component, to give participants something useful and helpful to take away from the meeting with them. Ideally, the meeting will also provide a challenge to participants to go back to their businesses and put what they've learned into practice. (More information about planning effective BLN meetings is provided below.)

BLNs generally have at least one lead business that is especially interested in disability issues and provides support to the organization through a designated employee who serves as chairperson. Or the BLN may be led by a chapter president who is a well-known and respected member of the business community. In addition, the BLN will usually have a slate of officers elected by the members who serve as an executive committee, and it may also have working groups created to accomplish specific tasks such as holding a major event or increasing the membership. In some cases, a BLN decides to expand its leadership to a board of directors.

Usually, BLNs cooperate closely with local branches of the [Society for Human](#)

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Resource Management (SHRM), the Chamber of Commerce and other employer organizations. These relationships are crucial to the success of the BLN because generally speaking, business people will not come to BLN meetings in large numbers. The BLN must take its message to the employment community through partnerships with local employer organizations.

You can visit some of the BLN websites listed in the Resources Section at the end of this brief for more examples of BLN activities.

### *Florida's Approach*

A 2007 survey of local Florida BLN employers found that the leading impediment to the employment of people with disabilities is "attitudes" at all corporate levels, and respondents recommended training and exposure to people with disabilities in their workplaces as solutions. As a result of the findings, the local Florida BLNs have chosen three approaches to opening employers' doors: 1) Train BLN members by dispelling myths about employees with disabilities and highlighting the many benefits of a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities; 2) Raise awareness and train employers in the local area through cooperative arrangements with local Chambers of Commerce, Societies for Human Resource Management, and other organizations where employers gather; and 3) Provide no-risk opportunities for employers to experience people with disabilities in their workplaces through hiring, internships and mentoring opportunities. Here are some of the ways the BLNs are implementing these strategies:

- ◆ Florida BLN chapter meetings always include a testimonial from a business member about their experiences hiring and working with people with disabilities.
- ◆ The Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce holds a monthly "Business Nuts and Bolts" session for its members—the Big Bend BLN conducted a session at the March 2007 meeting on the benefits of employing people with disabilities.
- ◆ The Polk County BLN partnered with the Mid-Florida SHRM to present *Turning Diversity into Dollars...The Many Benefits of Hiring Workers with Disabilities*. The same training was held for SHRM members in Tallahassee and HRCI credits were provided to HR professionals at that event.
- ◆ The BLNs participate in Disability Mentoring Day, a nationwide event which promotes career development for students and job-seekers with disabilities through job shadowing and hands-on career exploration.

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### WHY DO BUSINESSES JOIN BLNs?

Employers have various reasons for joining a BLN:

- ◆ They may have a disability or have a family member or close friend with a disability and realize the value of the public/private partnership in opening employers' doors.
- ◆ Employers are facing workforce shortages in most states due to a low unemployment rate. This has led employers to diversify their workforces like never before and seek previously-untapped workers.
- ◆ When employers hire people with disabilities they earn the loyal and lucrative patronage of their family and friends. It is estimated that people with disabilities and those who care about them have discretionary income of \$3 trillion. In a recent survey of American consumers, 88 percent said they would rather give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities.
- ◆ Many employers have had successful experiences in employing people with disabilities and are eager to spread the word.
- ◆ Business people may be involved in other organizations like Societies for Human Resource Management that have made promoting the employment of people with disabilities an organizational priority.
- ◆ Finally, some people become involved because someone they know and respect asked them to join.

Whatever might prompt their membership, here are three key things a Business Leadership Network offers everyone who joins:

**Resources** on hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. These could include informational materials and presentations, access to expert consultation on employment issues, custom training opportunities or job development connections.

**Networking and learning** opportunities around a shared interest. Regular meetings as well as special events provide a chance for face-to-face time with other business professionals who share an interest in disability employment.

**Recognition** for their efforts and results. Businesses appreciate being appreciated when they put extra effort into providing good jobs for people with disabilities.

Clearly, these outcomes are directly related to what most Medicaid Infrastructure Grants are trying to accomplish. It is why Business Leadership Networks are such a natural partner for MIGs, and why MIGs need to seriously consider whether and how to be involved with BLNs.

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### HOW CAN MIGS WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH BLNs?

A Business Leadership Network is a business-to-business organization. They need to be supported and led by business members. However, BLN chapters also have a “state partner” which provides financial, and sometimes administrative and professional, support. MIGs can play this role, as well as laying the groundwork for a new BLN. This role might also be played by state agencies such as the Department of Labor or Workforce Development, the Vocational Rehabilitation agency, or some other agency. When this happens, MIGs might offer to provide resources and support for a BLN in partnership with the state agency.

#### State Examples

At least a dozen MIG projects around the country are engaged in some type of work with Business Leadership Networks. In some states, the MIG grant directly funds the development and maintenance of local BLN chapters. In Florida, the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant contracts with a private consulting firm that handles all the work to develop and provide ongoing support for several community-level BLNs—this is the Florida MIG’s number one activity. Illinois and Oregon are other states that directly support BLN development. States such as Michigan, Louisiana and Minnesota collaborate with established BLNs on special projects including job fairs, technical assistance for employers, internships and outreach. Maine is conducting a “BLN Feasibility Study” and Kansas is working on a BLN pilot project.

It should be noted, however, that USBLN policy is that BLNs should not be operated by state agencies. It is crucial that state partner support for a BLN come from someone who *knows business*, who truly understands how businesses operate and communicate. A typical state agency staff person does not have this experience and expertise. What’s a MIG to do? Hire someone with a business background to support the BLN! You can achieve this through a direct state agency hire, creating a job position that requires business experience and networking skills, or you can contract with a private organization that has this expertise. Ideally, you want an individual or organization that has direct experience in building and sustaining employer-based associations such as BLNs.

Although the overall effort needs to be organized and led by someone with a business background, there are some tasks that MIG or state agency staff could perform to help support BLNs. In the short term, as a BLN is becoming established, this might include providing administrative support

such as sending meeting notices, securing meeting space and performing other logistical tasks. MIGs could also provide resources and support for BLN kick-off events by securing conference space or subsidizing presenters’ costs. To sustain a BLN in the longer term, MIG staff might help by maintaining membership records, identifying presenters with relevant expertise for meetings and events, hosting a website for BLN

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members, connecting BLN members with experts to answer questions or provide consultation, and answering members' questions about federal and state benefits and programs.

### WHEN IS A BLN IS RIGHT FOR OUR COMMUNITY?

Everyone agrees, the BLN model is not the only way to work effectively with the business community, and it is not always the best model for every state or every community. But how do you know whether a BLN is the right strategy at the right time? Answering the following questions can help a MIG make that decision.

- ◆ **Corporate leadership and control** BLNs are most successful when businesses take responsibility and leadership for the organization and its activities.

*Are businesses in your community ready to step up to the plate? Can you recruit or develop interested business leaders? Who are the potential lead companies?*

- ◆ **Critical mass of interested businesses** The BLN needs more than just 2 or 3 interested businesses.

*How much interest is there in the community for a BLN? Are there organizations that can bring a number of businesses to the table, such as a local SHRM chapter or an active Chamber of Commerce?*

- ◆ **Business diversity** BLNs thrive when they include a diverse group of businesses, in terms of both type of industry and business size. At the same time, large businesses are necessary—it's generally thought that if more than 80 percent of local employers are small businesses, a BLN may not be the best option.

*Does the business community being targeted include a wide variety of industries to recruit from? Are there some existing organizations that could help recruit smaller businesses, that often have similar needs but fewer resources than large businesses?*

- ◆ **Access to political leadership** When a BLN can offer an event with the Governor or other important state leader in attendance, businesses will pay attention.

*Is your Governor supportive? Is there another high-level state leader who could effectively champion a BLN?*

- ◆ **Resources for services and activities** BLNs need staff with business experience and other resources to meet members' needs.

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*What agency or agencies are ready to be a state partner and provide financial support to get the BLN started? Is there someone with a business background to take leadership of this project? How could the BLN be sustained if MIG or agency funding ended?*

- ◆ **Business needs and interests** BLNs have to be ready to meet the needs of businesses, and provide the resources they want.

*Has there been a recent assessment of the resources businesses need in connection with hiring and retaining employees with disabilities? If not, what work should be done to make sure the MIG and other state partners understand business needs and interests, such as research or surveys?*

### A BLN SEEMS THE RIGHT WAY TO GO—BUT WHERE DO WE START?

Once a decision is made that it is the right time and place for a Business Leadership Network, the challenge is just beginning! Here are some ideas for next steps.

#### RECRUITING BUSINESSES

Get a list of all the major businesses in your state, and identify the ones most engaged in disability-related initiatives. Make an effort to talk directly with them about a BLN. Work your professional contacts to identify a high-level executive to talk to, if you can, or find a senior human resources manager.

Find a list of leading business associations—do any of these promote disability-issues? Talk with their leadership to see if they would partner with you to develop and support a BLN. Local chapters of the Chamber of Commerce and Society of Human Resource Managers are a great place to start. Others include the Rotary Club, Jaycees, Tip Clubs and other business networking organizations. Be sure to identify some organizations that will help you reach small business.

Research to learn what industries have the most job growth potential, and target businesses in these areas for early contact. Consider:

- ◆ Insurance companies
- ◆ Financial services companies
- ◆ Banks
- ◆ Law firms
- ◆ Retailers
- ◆ Credit card companies
- ◆ Staffing agencies
- ◆ Call centers
- ◆ Manufacturers
- ◆ Media companies
- ◆ Universities
- ◆ Hospitals
- ◆ Local, county and state government offices

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When you talk to people about the idea of a BLN be careful to really *listen* to what they say. Ask them: Is there a need among businesses around hiring people with disabilities, and what is it? What is the typical business attitude about these issues? What size businesses are struggling most with this? Who would be natural partners in developing a BLN? Who are the state's leaders in creative hiring and retention policies, disability awareness, or assistive technologies? Which business leaders have a personal connection to disability issues? Then follow up on the tips you get from businesspeople you talk to, by contacting the people and organizations they identify.

Don't get discouraged if this process takes a long time. One MIG found it took a year to find a corporate leader for one BLN chapter.

### GETTING POLITICAL SUPPORT

Securing high-level support from state government can be crucial to a BLN's success. Business people want to know they are part of something that is important—they appreciate the opportunity to have the ear of state government, and they respond to messages from high-level political leaders. Likewise, many political leaders will also appreciate the chance to interact with an organization like the BLN, which combines a pro-business message with an important public policy initiative, so highlight this relationship when you enlist politicians to be involved.

Many MIGs already have high-level administration support for their employment and disability initiatives, which they can parlay into support for BLN-related activities. Other MIGs may want to enlist their business partners to bring the BLN to the attention of political leaders.

### ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Helping establish a BLN take careful planning to make sure it can function effectively. This means decisions have to be made such as: How will meetings be organized and facilitated? How will chapter business be conducted? Who will maintain member information, distribute agendas, and handle logistics for each meeting? Who will manage chapter finances and communications? Who will plan meetings and other events, identify business needs and how to respond to them, line up speakers and presentations, and develop expert resources to meet individual business needs? Who will liaison with the lead company and state partner?

While a MIG could potentially fund all these tasks and activities, some thought should be given to how the BLN infrastructure can be sustained beyond the MIG. Consider what level of support the BLN might get from its state and corporate partners, membership fees or other revenue.

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### KICK-OFF EVENT

Launching a new BLN is a big deal, and it deserves to be marked with a big event. The kick-off event should be designed to get maximum attention *from* businesses, and *for* businesses. A key strategy is to have your state's Governor make an appearance – this will help ensure your event is well-attended, and it sends the message to businesses that the BLN is an important and useful tool for them. Try to make sure other state and local dignitaries and prominent business leaders attend.

The event should provide people who attend it an understanding of what Business Leadership Networks are all about, but the focus should be on networking—a chance to see and be seen. The program should be kept short and simple, perhaps featuring short speeches by the Governor and other dignitaries, and brief testimonials from business people about their hiring experiences. Offer information about the benefits of BLN membership and ideas for planned activities.

Good venues for BLN kick-off events might be a convention center or college campus, or meeting space at a large company's facilities. In many cases, you can secure meeting space at no cost from businesses or organizations that want to support the BLN.

Plan on having press at your kick-off event to make sure the event and the businesses that attend get maximum visibility. Issue a press release, and make it snazzy. (Ask the Communications or Press Relations Department of a corporation or state agency you are working with to draft and circulate the press release.)

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### HOW DO WE ATTRACT BUSINESSES TO A NEW BLN?

Outreach to businesses should directly address their business-related needs; in other words, be prepared to answer the "What's in it for me?" question. Here are some of the messages that will help do that:

**Business need: Workforce shortages**

**Message:** People with disabilities are an untapped source to meet workforce shortages. BLNs can help businesses identify workers to fill this need.

**Business need: Quality workers**

**Message:** People with disabilities have the skills businesses need, and are high-quality employees. BLN activities and events make the connection between the business and this quality workforce.

**Business need: Customer appeal**

**Message:** People like doing business with businesses that employ people with disabilities. Joining a BLN tells people that the company cares about people with disabilities.

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**Business need: Consumer market**

**Message:** People with disabilities represent a valuable customer market for businesses. BLN membership demonstrates a company's commitment to these customers.

**Business need: Business visibility**

**Message:** BLN participation offers opportunities for "free advertising" to people with disabilities and other potential customers. BLNs also provide public recognition for a business's efforts to be a responsible member of the community.

**Business need: Training and consultation**

**Message:** BLNs are a resource to businesses, providing expert consultation and training on disability issues from ADA compliance to disability "etiquette" to assistive technology. Every meeting is a learning event, and the chapter offers a network of other expertise the business can tap into. Business-to-business mentoring makes sure that businesses hear from people who understand and identify with their needs!

**Business need: Networking opportunity**

**Message:** A BLN chapter represents a diverse group of business people from all sorts of industries, all with a common interest, providing a perfect networking environment as well as a worthy cause.

**Business need: Implementing accommodations**

**Message:** Reasonable accommodations really are *reasonable!* BLNs can help businesses learn about resources for finding effective, creative and low-cost accommodations.

**Business need: Assessing risks**

**Message:** An excessive concern about being sued is unfounded. BLNs are a resource for advice and consultation about legal rights and responsibilities in the employer-employee relationship.

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### WHAT MAKES A BLN SUCCESSFUL IN THE LONG TERM?

Sustaining a successful BLN doesn't just happen—it takes careful planning and on-going attention. Long-term, sustainable funding is probably the most crucial issue to think about for BLNs, and there are a range of options to consider:

**Workforce System Model:** Tapping into the mainstream workforce development system can be a strong sustainability strategy. For example, the BLN leadership in Florida is working with Workforce Florida, Inc. (WFI), the nonprofit organization for all of Florida's Workforce Boards and One-Stop Career Centers. The WFI has a budget of \$91 million dollars but was spending almost nothing on employment for people with

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disabilities. The BLN leadership approached WFI with a business proposal demonstrating how the BLN can help WFI advance its goals to develop a diverse workforce. In addition, the BLN expanded its focus to include returning veterans with disabilities, which is a high priority population for the WFI.

*Membership Model:* With this model, participating businesses pay dues to fund the valuable BLN services and supports that help members maintain diversity in their workforce. These may include employee resources on disability-related services and benefits counseling, and training and technical assistance for businesses (see sidebar).

*Fee-for-Services Model:* This model allows BLNs to provide needed services and supports to members on a fee-for-service basis. One way to develop this model without having to build an extensively trained staff is for the BLN to become a “broker” for a stable of experienced and reputable service providers. The BLN hires and manages the service provider and is the intermediary for the BLN member, thus eliminating the challenge for human resource managers or small business owners to identify, hire and manage providers of these services.

Other sustainability issues to consider include:

**Constant business focus** — This is a feature of BLNs that is integral to their continued success. Maintain the business focus by making sure support for the BLN comes from people with business expertise, and making sure you frequently assess the business needs of BLN members. Keep in mind that you may need different activities in different parts of the state, or for different types and sizes of businesses.

**Meaningful involvement** — Businesses have to take ownership of the BLN, and adopt its mission as their own. You can foster this by challenging individual members to help achieve the BLN’s goals, such as recruiting new BLN members, participating in a mentoring project, or increasing retention rates for people with disabilities at their

### BLN Services and Supports

#### **Resources for Employees**

- ◆ Developing and maintaining resource materials on publicly-funded and employer-provided disability services, veteran’s services, and employment-related supports available to individuals with disabilities and their families.
- ◆ Access to one-on-one benefits and financial counseling to help navigate the range of employer- and publicly-funded services and supports they or a family member needs to stay in the workforce.

#### **Resources for Employers**

- ◆ On-going training and technical support such as problem solving on accommodations; technical assistance with hiring and employment policies; and resource for resolving employment disputes.

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companies.

**Effective meetings** — Working to ensure that every meeting is engaging and interesting is probably the single most important—and most challenging—part of sustaining a successful BLN. Businesspeople do not have time for meetings that are boring or pointless, no matter how worthy the cause. Make sure every meeting provides real value, learning and interest to the members.

**On-going support and advice** — Many members would value an informal source of consultation on disability issues they can contact as workplace issues arise. Creating a peer-to-peer network to meet this need will ensure that BLN membership remains valuable to businesses long after the initial kick-off excitement fades.

**Loaned executive** — Through this mechanism, a dedicated corporate member provides an executive from the company to work on BLN initiatives for a period of time. This can be an invaluable source of expertise, energy and leadership.

### **Tips for Great Meetings**

*Have an agenda planned well ahead of time.* If there's not a well-defined agenda, there's no need to hold a meeting!

*Include an educational component in every meeting,* in addition to conducting BLN business. The educational part of the program should directly respond to members' expressed interests and needs. Presentations should be high quality, with a valuable take-away message.

*Begin and end every meeting on time.* This sends the message that you respect and value members' time. Make sure whoever chairs the meeting is committed to this approach, and has the skill to enforce it. Consider keeping regular meetings to a maximum of one-and-a-half hours. Breakfast time is often a good time for busy people to meet—the host company can provide a continental breakfast and coffee.

*Business-to-business testimonials are an important part of BLN meetings.* They are an opportunity for members to share and learn insights from each other, as well as recognize members' achievements.

*End each meeting with a direct challenge to the members.* For example, ask every member to bring at least one guest (and potential new member) to the next meeting; have a conversation with one other business acquaintance about hiring people with disabilities; make a commitment to participate in the chapter's next major event; fill out a business needs survey; or provide an agenda suggestion before the next meeting.

**Business Leadership Networks****WHAT CAN WE DO IF A BUSINESS LEADERSHIP NETWORK ISN'T RIGHT FOR OUR STATE?**

BLNs are not the only model for MIGs working with business! If a BLN does not seem viable in your community, there are other strategies to try. You can develop productive one-on-one relationships with particular businesses; work with existing business associations such as a local Chamber of Commerce or Industry Liaison Groups; develop a community resource network for businesses that need disability expertise; or create a business-oriented website to help meet information needs businesses have about hiring people with disabilities. These and other approaches will be explained and explored more fully in an upcoming Business Brief.

## Resources to Learn More

### *Working with business*

**NCHSD Business Brief #1: Building Partnerships with Business, Foundations for a Strong Beginning** (<http://www.nchsd.org/library/file.asp?id=300160>)

**NCHSD Business Brief #2: Hands-On/How-To Strategies for Collaborating with Business** (<http://www.nchsd.org/library/file.asp?id=300337>)

**Working with Business: A Successful Public-Private Partnership** (Leslie Wilson presentation) (<http://www.nchsd.org/library/file.asp?id=300080>)

**Successful Models for Developing Public/Private Partnerships with Business to Support Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities** (Susan O'Mara and Dana Rosanelli, 2004) (<http://www.nchsd.org/library/file.asp?id=300610>).

**BLNsWork! A Report on Florida's Local Business Leadership Networks** (<http://www.nchsd.org/library/file.asp?id=300059>)

***Starting a BLN*** (from the USBLN website (<http://www.usbln.org/about/starting.aspx>))

**Starting and Operating a BLN** - Common elements among many BLNs that have initiated programs and achieved outcomes consistent with their mission.

**Going After the Unconverted** - BLN is based on the premise that people respond to their peers. BLN employers who successfully hire candidates with disabilities serve as advocates to other employers.

**Sustaining BLN Involvement** - Employers attending a BLN Summit offered these suggestions for sustaining and enhancing interest in BLN activities.

**What Chambers of Commerce Can Do** - Local Chambers can take an active role in promoting and growing a BLN.

### *State and local BLN websites*

- Arizona - <http://www.azbln.com>
- California - [www.cablcn.org](http://www.cablcn.org)
- Illinois, Chicagoland - [www.cbln.org](http://www.cbln.org)
- Florida - [www.abletrust.org/bln](http://www.abletrust.org/bln); local chapters - [www.myabilities.org](http://www.myabilities.org).
- Louisiana - [www.lbln.org](http://www.lbln.org)
- Maryland, Eastern Shore - [www.esbln.org](http://www.esbln.org)
- Massachusetts - [www.massbln.org](http://www.massbln.org)
- Michigan - <http://www.miblcn.org>
- Minnesota - [www.mnbln.org](http://www.mnbln.org)
- Oregon - [www.obln.org](http://www.obln.org)
- Pennsylvania - [www.blnofpa.org](http://www.blnofpa.org)

## Resources to Learn More

- Texas, Gulf Coast - [www.imagineenterprises.com/gcbln.html](http://www.imagineenterprises.com/gcbln.html)
- Virginia - [www.vabln.org](http://www.vabln.org)
- Washington State - [www.wsbln.org](http://www.wsbln.org)
- Wyoming - [www.wy-bln.com](http://www.wy-bln.com)

**Other Resources**

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Directory of Local Chambers (<http://www.uschamber.com/chambers/directory/default.htm?n=tb>)

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) ([www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org))

National Center on Workforce and Disability – Business Leadership Networks page ([http://www.onestops.info/article.php?article\\_id=83&subcat\\_id=0](http://www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=83&subcat_id=0))

Click on a state below to find out if they have a BLN chapter (from [www.usbln.org](http://www.usbln.org)):

<a href="#">Alabama</a>	<a href="#">Kentucky</a>	<a href="#">Ohio</a>
<a href="#">Alaska</a>	<a href="#">Louisiana</a>	<a href="#">Oklahoma</a>
<a href="#">Arizona</a>	<a href="#">Maine</a>	<a href="#">Oregon</a>
<a href="#">Arkansas</a>	<a href="#">Massachusetts</a>	<a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>
<a href="#">California</a>	<a href="#">Michigan</a>	<a href="#">Rhode Island</a>
<a href="#">Colorado</a>	<a href="#">Minnesota</a>	<a href="#">South Carolina</a>
<a href="#">Connecticut</a>	<a href="#">Mississippi</a>	<a href="#">South Dakota</a>
<a href="#">Delaware</a>	<a href="#">Missouri</a>	<a href="#">Tennessee</a>
<a href="#">District of Columbia</a>	<a href="#">Montana</a>	<a href="#">Texas</a>
<a href="#">Florida</a>	<a href="#">Nebraska</a>	<a href="#">Utah</a>
<a href="#">Georgia</a>	<a href="#">Nevada</a>	<a href="#">Vermont</a>
<a href="#">Hawaii</a>	<a href="#">New Hampshire</a>	<a href="#">Virginia</a>
<a href="#">Idaho</a>	<a href="#">New Jersey</a>	<a href="#">Washington</a>
<a href="#">Illinois</a>	<a href="#">New Mexico</a>	<a href="#">West Virginia</a>
<a href="#">Indiana</a>	<a href="#">New York</a>	<a href="#">Wisconsin</a>
<a href="#">Iowa</a>	<a href="#">North Carolina</a>	<a href="#">Wyoming</a>
<a href="#">Kansas</a>	<a href="#">North Dakota</a>	

Contributing author Leslie Wilson is President/CEO of *Wilson Resources, Inc.* (WRI), which is assisting the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities as contractual project manager for the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant. The MIG provides extensive training and technical assistance on employment and the development of and support to local Business Leadership Networks in several pilot sites. For more information about Florida's successful BLNs, view the **BLNsWork!** report cited above.

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