



Interview with Jack Mills **Director, National Network of Sector Partners**

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the NTAR Leadership Center, helping state leaders help adults with disabilities to employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and change.

[Laurie Harrington] Welcome to Lead.State.Gov, a feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host, Laurie Harrington. Today I'm speaking with Jack Mills. Jack Mills leads the National Network of Sector Partners, an initiative of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. He guides NNSP's efforts to improve employment for low-income individuals and other workers, and benefit the industries in which they work, through the use of sector initiatives. He joined the Insight Center in 2005. Jack is a nationally recognized expert in the field of workforce development with over 20 years of experience. He has authored and co-authored publications including *Building Skills, Increasing Economic Vitality: A Handbook for State Policymakers*, and *Filling America's Jobs: How Businesses can Implement Sector Workforce Development Strategies for Jobs and Economic Growth*. Thanks for being with us today, Jack. Can you please describe the National Network of Sector Partners and describe its mission for us?

[Jack Mills] Well, the National Network of Sector Partners is an 11-year-old initiative of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. We are a member organization. Among our members, one group is made up of close to 400 partners in sector initiatives, and among them there are about 100 that work in the healthcare industry, about 100 that work in the manufacturing industry, significant numbers in three other industries -- construction, energy, and utilities -- and information technology, and the balance are in 13 additional industry sectors. So that's the first group. The second group of our members is made up of those who support sector initiatives, as an example, policymakers, but also others. Now, in terms of our mission, our mission is for all people to have jobs that provide economic security in vibrant, regional economies where key industries are prosperous. Our goals in terms of accomplishing that mission reflect the economic conditions we are in. They include three: first of all, increasing access to good jobs and career paths, and secondly, improving job quality, and thirdly, creating good jobs. And as you might imagine, we work with our member sector initiatives and the members who are policymakers, et cetera, to accomplish our mission and those goals.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you talk a little bit about why you think industry sector-based workforce development is an effective way of improving employment and economic opportunities for disadvantaged populations?

[Jack Mills] When we look at the effectiveness of workforce development, the important thing from a policy point of view, but also from a learning point of view on the ground among workforce development practitioners, is to try to be evidence-based. This idea that we can learn from the evidence of our work is so important. You know, there was a recent random assignment study, kind of the gold standard of evaluations, and they evaluated mature sector initiatives, three mature sector initiatives, and looked at over 1,000 people who received services from those three



sector initiatives. The point of the random assignment evaluation is that there is a control group, and again, 1,000 people, very similar to those who received the services from the sector initiatives; however, they could do anything in terms of getting a job and getting a good job, except they could not use the services of these sector initiatives. And what we know from this is that the sector initiatives produced results that were much better, 18 percent better earnings, just as an example. And the folks I'm talking about -- you know, you use the word "disadvantaged" just to say something about this group, low-income individuals, significant portions with criminal records, large numbers were single parents who by and large had low educational attainment. People who, on their own, would have a tough time getting a good job, and as I say, 18 percent better results for those folks produced by the sector initiatives.

The thing is, through, that that's only half the story because what we get also, from surveys of employers -- and I'm thinking about surveys in Massachusetts and also in Pennsylvania -- are that sector initiatives also produce tremendous benefits for employers. You know, in Pennsylvania, 84 percent of the employers, and there were -- I can't remember the number -- but many, many employers surveyed, 84 percent said that the sector initiatives improved their productivity. Our organization, over the past year, interviewed 60 employers who are either manufacturers or healthcare employers, and the story we got consistently was this same idea that sector initiatives are producing tremendous benefits.

You ask the question why? There's a variety of reasons. This is the secret sauce of sector initiatives. Let me hit some high notes. You know first of all, sector initiatives focused on our regional labor market, that is where employers hire. So they can really meet employers' needs rather than being bounded by jurisdictional or other kinds of boundaries. They develop a deep understanding of the needs of a key industry, and in particular, an industry whose structure makes it possible to reach one of the three goals I mentioned: increased access to good jobs, improved job quality, or job creation. The sector initiatives developed, also, a deep understanding of the needs of the workforce, jobseekers and employees both, including the assets people bring and also the challenges they face. You know from that work in design -- research and design, if you will -- then comes the operational phase. And there's coordination of services, coordination of funding, making the barriers for workers and for employers go away to the extent possible. There is improvement of services, so that they are really responsive both to the needs of the industry and to workers. There's adaptability. The three sector initiatives in the random assignment study I mentioned, they said that their ability to adapt as the economic conditions changed over the course of the past several years during the time of the evaluation, that was really crucial to them. But of course, to adapt you have to know, and therefore those early steps, which I talked about, are important.

Sector initiatives also do one other thing. In addition to producing the programmatic benefits for jobseekers and workers and employers, they also produce systems change. You know, the idea of sector initiatives is that you use what you have developed in terms of relationships and in terms of proofs of concept and a variety of other things that you gain by doing the work to make larger changes than just the benefits of those who are directly involved. And those changes, they're in three areas. So changes in the way that services are coordinated because if you think of the variety of needs of employers and workers in an industry, you have to imagine that it's a hub and



spoke system with a coordinating entity in the center, and a variety of partners providing the range of services that the industry needs because those needs are complex. And then moving from that hub and spoke system and the way that services are coordinated, improving the services themselves, so that the service is really responsive to and meet employer and worker needs. In addition to that, changes in employer practices. You know, in the disability community, we have a lot of tools. We have reasonable accommodation. We have job carving. We have a whole variety of things where it's not about changing the individual; it's about changing the practices of the employer. And so sector initiatives similarly think broadly about industry practices, looking for the places where there is a win/win for employers and for workers. And you can see this in a wide range of areas, but it certainly applies to people who have disabilities. And then the third area is, of course, policy, and the things that sector initiatives do can be fodder for the mill of changing policy. Of course, sector initiatives can also educate policymakers. So those are some of the things that are part of the secret sauce of sector initiatives. Really, it takes a great deal of expertise and primarily moving toward a relationship with employers and with workers rather than just a transactional approach. And for that relationship, there is a deep importance of understanding employers' needs and understanding jobseekers and workers' needs.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you give us an example of a sector-based initiative that you think is having an impact, particularly one that is specifically having an impact on the employment of people with disabilities?

[Jack Mills] You know, I love to talk about Rubicon Programs in the Bay Area. Good friends of mine have worked there in the past, continue to work their now, and they do great work. You know, Rubicon focuses on high-growth industries in the Bay Area and among other things they do because they provide a broad range of services. They provide employment services to folks who have psychiatric disabilities, and you know, this is one of several services that they provide so that they can meet the needs of folks with psychiatric disabilities in a variety of ways. But when it comes to the employment side of things, meeting the needs of those high-growth industries, they work with a range of people, including people who have psychiatric disabilities, to move them into good jobs. So that's one example. You know, it's interesting. The Department of Labor, just to mention another example, gave an honorable mention to something, "The Threshold Project" of the Indianapolis Private Industry Council some years ago. So these services by sector initiatives focused on particular industries, and at the same time meeting the needs of people with disabilities, it's not new. You know, I want to go on to say something. You know, our workforce is increasingly maturing. I guess that's the right word. I have to apply it to myself. And one of the things we know is that people, as they get older, lose some physical capacity, so the boundary line between those who have disabilities and other workers increasingly is getting a little bit fuzzy. And so employers that are learning from sector initiatives that meet the needs of people with disabilities, they are finding that they are applying universal design or use of software that can be voice activated or the whole range of kind of accommodations that we have thought previously as being applicable to people who have a disability. Well, those accommodations are meeting the needs of folks who -- you know, whose bodies aren't working as well as they used to. So I think we're seeing the great benefit of these services and techniques that meet the needs of people with disabilities applied much more generally.



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[Laurie Harrington] Thanks, Jack, for speaking with us today. I've been speaking with Jack Mills, the Director of the National Network of Sector Partners. This is Laurie Harrington for Lead.State.Gov with the NTAR Leadership Center. For more information about the NTAR leadership center and its research activities visit www.ntarcenter.org.

July 2010