



## **Interview with Millie Ryan** **Executive Director, Alaska's Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education**

**[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. Millie Ryan is the Executive Director of Alaska's Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education and has worked for the council for the past 12 years. Prior to working for the council, she worked almost 10 years for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation developing, implementing, and evaluating Alaska's service delivery system for supported employment, independent living and transitioning from school to adult life. Welcome Millie and thank you so much for speaking with us today. First Millie, could you please describe your START-Up program in Alaska and give the listeners a context of how the initiative got off the ground?

**[Millie Ryan]** Basically, what we have done is put together a customized self-employment approach that's used at our one-stop job centers. We have customized self-employment facilitators who work with individuals interested in owning their own business. Going through a discovery process working with the folks in the job center and the small business development center and the individual support team to help develop the business plan. And basically give the person a good start on getting their business going. We have those customized self-employment facilitators in Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks, although they do serve other people outside their particular areas. Then the other aspect of our program is a business incubator. And originally we had thought to have a typical incubator located in Anchorage where there would be a facility where people would have their small businesses and they would receive all the support that one would receive at any business incubator. They would have access to someone who would help them with marketing, with their books, with basically keeping their business running and growing. However, when we had our very first advisory committee meeting, we had a man who ran the business incubator in Kenai and he said, "Whatever you do, don't tie yourself down to a physical location because somebody is going to come in who needs the service and you're just not going to be able to accommodate them." So what we have done instead is basically have a virtual incubator who works with folks over the web, through the phone, provides documents to them. That person gets involved fairly early on in the process and her responsibility is to help the business really get off to a strong start; and to help them grow and add additional sales and those kinds of things. So those are the two models then in sort of a nutshell. In terms of how we got started. We actually had been kind of working around self-employment for, jeez, I would say maybe 10 years or so. We had some funds to really look at what some of the barriers were to getting self-employment going on a more consistent basis state-wide. We were able to do some piloting. And when we had- when vocational rehabilitation had its customized employment grant at the job centers a few folks had actually chosen self-employment. But none of those previous things had resulted in any real policy change or any real consistent capacity building. So when the Office of Disability Employment Policy came out with its grant, the Research and Demonstration Grant, we were really excited. We thought that that would give us that



opportunity to develop some kind of unique approaches, building on what we've done to that point in time and really focusing in on identifying what the policy barriers were and what we might do to make some changes. So that's the basic overview of our program. Our funding started on October 1, 2006. We were able to get a no-cost extension year. It's going to run through September 30th of this year and then basically the program will be done as a project. However, I think we're setting up some structures so that the facilitators will be able to continue to offer their services and we're looking at ways to get more people trying to be facilitators.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Why do you think Alaska values self-employment for people with disabilities as an employment policy priority as opposed to other types of employment policies?

**[Millie Ryan]** Well, in terms of just Alaska as a state, I think the number of people who own small businesses is probably larger than other states. I think a lot of people have sort of an independent spirit here, there's not a lot of big businesses so you're going to see people starting some small things. So just like anyone else in Alaska, it's a great option for people with disabilities who may not want wage employment for any number of reasons. And then I think just in relationship, sometimes some people with disabilities they really do need to accommodate their medical condition so that they can work when it works well for them, when they're feeling like they are able to devote the time to it. But I think just like anybody else, it just needs to be an option that's available. It's interesting in Alaska, and it's probably the same in other states, we see that in the more rural areas of the state it's more accepted way for people to work. In our bigger cities like Anchorage, I think the assumption a lot of time is that there's lots of wage employment activities then why are you thinking about being self-employed? But again, I think, just like anybody else, we need to make sure people have options.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Can you describe one of those business incubators for us? And talk about how, if at all, business incubators are formed around targeted industries as an economic development strategy or are they developed in some other way? And can you tell us about how you outreach to individuals to become part of these business incubators?

**[Millie Ryan]** It's really based on whatever businesses people happen to have. So it isn't really specific to any sort of a business. That's what's really nice about the virtual incubator approach. Jackie Stewart is the woman who is the virtual business incubator; she's actually based in Juneau. Like I said, she provides services over the phone. She uses web-based platform, that includes document sharing, videoconferencing, teleconferencing and she does visit people in person. She uses a process called iVocalize that works really well. Typically services are provided following the discovery process, and once the person has developed a business concept and then she's available to help them flush out their plan. Her services include assistance with the business plan development, seeking START-Up funding, just looking at the whole aspects of how do you start up your unique business. And then she provides a lot of follow-up services. There's marketing, financial recordkeeping, business expansion and then she also provides regular monthly training to groups of people via webinars on a variety of business topics as requested by participants. And it's really- it's an option for folks. I think most folks that we've served have really been excited about the opportunity to have longer-term follow-up services with their business. It really seems to make a difference for some folks. So, again, it's based according to people's sort of self-



selecting that they want the services of the business incubator. She works with folks on a whole different variety of businesses that folks have. And they're getting their business concept put together. Then she's going to come in and offer her advice in terms of putting the business plan together and some business start up things that's available to everyone. But in terms of the longer-term follow-up service that would be- they would decide whether they want to do that or not. But the majority of folks have wanted the long-term follow-up service.

**[Laurie Harrington]** What are the types of policy changes you are hoping to make to bring about a more systemic change in Alaska?

**[Millie Ryan]** A couple. Well, with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; we've been talking with them about keeping their cases open longer. Right now, the typical time for wage employment is 90 days and then people are closed as successfully employed. We're asking them to consider 180 days and I think that's probably going to be happening. So basically that would give time for to see that people were meeting their business expenses and that whatever the agreed upon income goal that they had had been reached. So being available a little bit longer there. We were looking to- there's a self-employment questionnaire that's used. We wanted that to be updated so it's more in line with discovery. One of the things that we've learned through our project is that when the discovery process is followed through fully, as it is meant to be, people are more likely to be successful. So that's something we want to see incorporated into policy. We really want to see that counselors are required to be part of the business planning team. The other thing that we really want to work on quite a bit is really looking at credentials for providers of customized self-employment. Making sure that they've had the required training, that they've had- that they're meeting some quality assurance standards. We have a similar process in place for our work incentives counseling and we'd like to see that in place for customized self-employment. The employment security division. It was interesting when we had our START-Up policy summit. They basically said they'd found that the cost of serving people in self-employment was actually no more than it had been for folks looking at wage employment. So they were much more willing to look at making some changes to their policy. We talked a lot about, well how do you document wages in self-employment? And looking at- seeing if they can get, in effect, policy that includes business records, looking at their profit statements, the balance statement would be a good way for them to show that the person was successfully self-employed. We also talked about them seeking a waiver that allows for up to \$5000 of Workforce Investment Act funds to be used for business START-Up. Making sure that Workforce Investment Act training funds, can be used to pay for the customized self-employment facilitators and the virtual business incubator coaches to assist or train the person in developing their business. Looking at their memorandum of agreement with small business development centers so they provide regular business classes and quick launch seminars in the one-stop centers. And then making sure that their website, their brochures and pamphlets really has information about self-employment options. With the Division of Public Assistance, we're looking at policy that allows work, putting together a self-employment plan, the business concept planning, the business plan development, the business feasibility study. Those kinds of things counting as work activity under temporary assistance. Our small business development center, we're working with them on policy that ensures that programs and training is accessible and available in alternative formats and environments. We had some great success with the quick



launch program, which basically brings together a group of would-be entrepreneurs together to work on their plans and share with one another. We're looking for the small business development centers to include those seminars into their regular training schedule. When we had quick launch training all the small business center development staff came to that training and they were really excited about it. So they are more than willing to look at ways to incorporate it into their training schedules. And then also having a memorandum of agreement with the one-stop job centers to provide regular training in the centers. So those are the kinds of policy things we're looking at. Rich Sanders who's the coordinator of the START-Up project is working very closely with each of those entities to make those changes. I don't think that will all happen overnight.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Thank you so much, Millie, for speaking with us today. I've been speaking with Millie Ryan, the Executive Director of the Governor's Council on Disability and Special Education for the state of Alaska. 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](http://www.ntarcenter.org).

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