



## **Interview with Eric Seleznow Executive Director, Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board**

**[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 featured podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host, Laurie Harrington. In May of 2007, Eric Seleznow was appointed as the Executive Director of the Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board, the Governor's chief policy making body for workforce development. The Governor's Workforce Investment Board convenes and focuses various workforce development partners, stakeholders, and industry on two key outcomes: a properly prepared workforce that meets the current and future demands of Maryland employers, and providing opportunities for all Marylanders to succeed in the 21st century workforce. Thank you for being with us today, Eric. We believe that Maryland may be the only state where the State Workforce Investment Board has adopted a formal resolution around the integration of universal design principles into the operation of the One Stop Centers. Can you tell us a little bit of how this formal resolution came about?

**[Eric Seleznow]** Well, I wasn't aware that we were the only Board to have done that yet. But that is great if we are. I hope more follow. You know, my Board, again, it's a State Workforce Board, it's a business-led, business-driven board, 51 percent business chaired by a CEO. And this Board, like many other workforce boards I have been involved with, is very interested in what we call the untapped population, groups of folks who are not fully included in the employment spectrum in the community. And of course, that would fit people with disabilities, and other population groups. And my Board has always been interested in serving the untapped populations, whether it be speakers of other languages, former offenders, TANF recipients or people with disabilities or returning veterans. You know, my Board has a huge interest in serving them. So in that spirit, several of my Board members, and we do have a Secretary for Disabilities on my Board, and a couple of non-profit service providers, in conversations came up with Board members about what we can do to impact the incredibly high rate of unemployment of people with disabilities. And, you know, as one of the barriers to getting those folks services is often, can they navigate One Stop services, can they get to the One Stops, are there services there for them? So, again, in that spirit, it was suggested that we adopt the principles of universal design earlier this year, actually late last year, my Board approved that motion, and now we are getting some technical assistance to bring those One Stops up to shape.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Do you think the formal resolution around the integration of universal design is a reflection of the fact that Maryland is the only state that has a cabinet level Department of Disabilities? And that the Governor has a mantra that there is no such thing as a spare Marylander?

**[Eric Seleznow]** I think we reflect his vision more than he reflects ours. The Governor is very clear, since he's been in office about no spare Marylander. And again, he meant that during the time of workforce shortages. Well, now the economic, the economy has changed of course and



it's not worker shortages, it's job shortages. But the same maxim still applies, that there is no spare Marylander. That every Marylander has value, that every Marylander should participate in the economy, let's grow the middle class, let's increase our workforce capacity, and that there's enough room for all of us at the table.

**[Laurie Harrington]** There are five local areas that have volunteered to be pilot sites for this universal design resolution. Can you talk to us a little bit about this implementation of this resolution in these five different areas?

**[Eric Seleznow]** Well, yes, I mean, you know, part of it is, you know, I am a workforce director. You know, I work on workforce and workforce policy. I am not an expert from the disabilities community, and that's not my background. So, I came to this sort of as a workforce generalist. And, how do we appeal to a lot of different communities in the workforce world? So, you know, our thinking was, you know, how do we get people to understand the concepts of universal design? Because a lot of folks in the disability community understand it, but a lot of folks outside of that community do not. And so we had to overcome some understanding of what does that really mean. It is about accessibility? Well, yes, but there's some other things. Is it about technology? Well, yes, but it's about other things. So there's a lot of groundwork that had to be laid about what exactly universal design is.

**[Laurie Harrington]** So, would you say that that is how you would characterize what the pilots are doing? Trying different definitions of universal design?

**[Eric Seleznow]** Well, yes, but that was sort of the challenge in getting to the point where people felt comfortable to approve it. The Board, and then of course, what the Board had suggested, or moved was that we would practice those principles in Maryland's One Stop system, which is twelve different workforce investment areas and 35 One Stop centers. So, you know, getting people to understand it is one thing and getting people to implement those principles are another. So, you know, getting through our connections with the NTAR project, we were able to secure, they were able to support us with some technical assistance to the local areas to begin the process of suggesting and implementing through universal design. So, five local workforce boards and One Stops volunteered to implement those, and so that is where we are right now. Bringing the technical assistance in to assess what is going on in those one stops, not only how they serve people with disabilities, but how they serve speakers of other languages, how they serve seniors, how they serve really any population that comes in there. Thus, of course, the term universal design.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Recently, you presented at the National Association of Workforce Boards and at that conference, you told a personal story of how you came to believe in the importance of employment of people with disabilities, and the importance of serving people with disabilities through the public workforce system. Can you share your story with us?

**[Eric Seleznow]** It's very fortunate; I used to run a local workforce system in another part of Maryland. And I had some really excellent staff. And, we had a job fair, it was a youth job fair. It was not a youth with disabilities job fair. It was not a youth with special problems job fair. It was



a job fair for young people. It had nothing to do with disabilities. But nothing not to do with that either. So I guess the point was of this, I remember being in this job fair and seeing all sorts of kids. Black ones, white ones, brown ones, red ones, yellow ones, and fat ones and thin ones and those with wheelchairs, and those, you know, signing and those that were developmentally disabled. And it was seamless and easy and unforced. And it was such a diverse group of kids, that you would not walk in there and say, oh, this one should be a disability job fair. Because it was kids. And I thought we did a great job, or the staff had did a great job of integrating all sorts of kids in this. So it was not overloaded one way or the other with kids with or without disabilities. It was just kids. And nobody batted an eyebrow at the group of kids. The employers were great, the parents were great, the staff was great, and you really just couldn't tell, it was seamless. So for me, it really moves me to say, wow, you don't have to do something special for people with disabilities. This is just a job fair. So let's get all the kids we work with into a job fair. So that experience sort of was an ah-hah moment for me. It was saying you don't have to be special, you just have to treat everyone special.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Maryland is only one of three states that were selected to participate in the State Leaders Innovation Institute as a part of the NTAR Leadership Center. Can you talk about how being a part of the NTAR Leadership Centers SLII effort has effected relationships between different departments in Maryland, specifically the Department of Disabilities, the Governor's Workforce Investment Board, the Department of Labor, the Department of Business and Economic Development, Transportation, Housing? How has the NTAR Leadership Center affected these relationships?

**[Eric Seleznow]** I think it has been a glue that has helped either keep some of these relationships together or bring some of these relationships together. You know, we have a voc. rehab. agency in Maryland. It's doing great work. We have a lot of other service providers, but at the department level, to have that cabinet-level person and their staff work with all the agencies across the board on improving services, or making folks aware of services for people with disabilities has had a tremendous impact in, sort of, enlightenment and awareness. And I think that has really helped develop relationships so all these state agencies and things could work together.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Do you think that thanks in part to the efforts of the NTAR SLII team, people with disabilities will have a better chance of benefiting from the expanded employment opportunities that are expected to result from the Base Realignment and Closure Commission?

**[Eric Seleznow]** That was another ah-hah moment and my friends over in the disability community. Because it's forty to sixty thousand jobs coming to Maryland. And, you know, the facilitated group we had through NTAR really helped me understand that, you know, if you don't get in there in the early stages of a major change, you may never get in. And so, you know, to have the opportunity for people with disabilities to increase the culture of the companies that are coming here, to market some of the great programs we have here was really and truly, I think, a great opportunity for Maryland. And, again, the ah-hah moment was, oh, get started early. Well, duh, that doesn't take a rocket scientist, but, you know, we don't always think that way in this



business; we come after the fact. And so here, we're trying to integrate disabilities services into everything else we're doing with businesses for the Base Realignment and Closure change.

**[Laurie Harrington]** What advice would you give to your counterparts at other state WIBs that are interested in improving access and services for people with disabilities through the One Stop system?

**[Eric Seleznow]** Well, I think it's a, gosh, symbolic is not the right word. I think it sets a bar. And, I think it says that, you know, it's another group of important folks who are business, industry, education, government, who are thinking this way about delivering services to all people in your community. And so, it's really important to set the bar, it's really important, I think, to communicate and to outreach to your partners that, you know, this issue is important, as it's important about working with veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan, as it is with working with former offenders, as it is working with a number groups that we are all tasked to work with in the workforce business. So, you know, it's just often that people with disabilities are often overlooked in that process. So, you know, it's good to put it front and center with everybody else.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Thank you, Eric, for speaking with us today. I have been speaking with Eric Seleznow, the Executive Director of the Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board. 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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