



Interview with Kathy Sweeney
Co-team leader of Minnesota's State Leaders Innovation Institute
Strategic Project Manager
Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

[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. Kathy Sweeney is the designated team leader for the Minnesota State Leaders Innovation Institute Team, is the Strategic Project Manager at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. She is responsible for facilitating partnerships and linking resources needed for regional development to succeed throughout Minnesota. She works with community, state, federal, and philanthropic partners to bring resources and talent together to implement successful development projects. She is also the current chair of the National Governor's Association Workforce Development Liaisons Partnership. Thank you for being with us today Kathy. Minnesota has historically been seen as a leader in workforce development and regional sector strategies as well as in disability employment. How has Minnesota been able to build on these strengths and form new cross agency and interagency partnerships under the NTAR Leadership Center's State Leaders Innovation Institute?

[Kathy Sweeney] Well, Minnesota has over the last 6 years had some great opportunities to link workforce development, economic development, economic competitiveness, because we, about 6 years ago we formed the Department of Employment and Economic Development. And, in so doing, we were able to bring together those important resources across the state. Since then we've been really working with self-defined regions to help those regions identify what are their key economic competitiveness assets in particular related to, what are their key industries. And then out of that comes an understanding of what kind of skill training and workforce development needs they have and then that makes it possible for us to do a better job of focusing on what our business customers need so that our job seeker customers can become part of the solution for the business customers. We've done a lot of work with industry sectors and clusters, regional industry clusters, and all of that I think has led to us being able to do some new system-wide activities that we couldn't do before we had that mental frame on things. And they key partners, um, of course the Department of Employment and Economic Development, newly formed, that's been really helpful to have that new foundation. And then we've been working really closely with the Minnesota state colleges and universities system, the University of Minnesota system is our training partner. And we have in Minnesota already in place a state-wide infrastructure workforce center with 49 workforce centers across the state. Those are governed by 16 workforce areas. And those 49 centers are really important partners in getting the work done.



[Laurie Harrington] The Minnesota SLII team coined the value proposition “we need everyone in the workplace for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.” How is Minnesota attempting to operationalize that value proposition?

[Kathy Sweeney] What we know in Minnesota is that we have, our state, 40% of the adults in the workforce in our state have a post-secondary credential at this time. And we also know that 6 years from now, 2016, our demographer projects that we need to have 56% of our adult workforce with a post-secondary credential. So, we’re 16% short, we’ve got 6 years to get there. That’s a lot of work to do. And so that kind of gives you an example of why it’s so important that we make it possible for everyone who has an interest and talent and ability to participate in the workforce, for them to be there and for them to be ready to have the credentials they need. So, the work that we’ve been doing with NTAR and SLII, State Leaders Innovation Institute, has been conditioned on our experience since 1993, when we began setting up the workforce system here, that we, our workforce centers in Minnesota have always included the vocational rehabilitation partner from Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act, along with Title I, Workforce Investment Act, and Title III, Wegner-Peyser people. And that’s been the foundation of our work in the workforce centers, but there’s so much more that can be done, and we’ve really benefited greatly from the opportunity to work more closely with the Medicaid Infrastructure Grants as they’ve been working to build even more capacity into this system of making it possible for people who have a disability and who maybe could not in the past get into the workforce to be there and to contribute their talent. So, we really do need everyone in the workplace for business to thrive and communities to prosper and this has given us an opportunity to build on, our infrastructure was pretty good, but there’s plenty of room for improvement and this has helped us to make some improvements.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you tell us a little bit about the SOAR career pilot project in the city of Duluth and tell us about any findings you’ve seen so far?

[Kathy Sweeney] The pilot that we’ve been doing in Duluth is again building on some infrastructure that we have in place with something that we call Minnesota fast track. I was referring earlier to our need to increase the skills of our adult workforce in Minnesota. To go from 40% to 56%. And, so, one of the things that we’ve been doing, and we call the work around that Minnesota Fast Track, and we realize that we could link up Minnesota Fast Track with our NTAR work and our Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, and we, that’s really what we’ve been doing in Duluth. We already have our Vocational Rehabilitation partner is doing Fast Track work, they’re one of the partners in that effort. We also realized that we could do more with our MIG work, our NTAR work, in that area. So we’ve actually been just utilizing that kind of approach toward working with persons with disabilities and making sure that all of our training that goes on is inclusive of everyone including making sure that we can accommodate all different kinds of learners, adult learners, in those classrooms. And just going way above and beyond of what you do in typical classrooms. To really reach out and make sure, and think about, are we using universal design in this classroom so that everyone can participate? And, um, ideally you always use universal design in every classroom. That’s the perfect world, but in reality we have found that we’ve got to sometimes go in very deliberately and take it to that extra level and then we stand back and we go “wow,” this is not only changing this classroom for this



particular group of people, it's changing it from here on out because the colleges are learning that what they thought was universally useful wasn't and that they needed to change their method of instruction quite a bit to make it more accessible for more adult learners. Again, when you improve services for person with disabilities you also improve services for people, for all adults. I think that's been the benefit.

[Laurie Harrington] Some states seem to find it particularly challenging to scale up new initiatives or change existing practices, but Minnesota seems to be a state that's able to pilot new ideas, evaluate the results, and then look for opportunities to institutionalize promising practices. What role do you think leadership plays in making this possible and besides leadership are there other critical factors that make this possible?

[Kathy Sweeney] Well first of all, thank you for acknowledging Minnesota that way, that's really a compliment to our state. And, it's one that's I think is, you know, the foundation of that kind of cooperative effort, does rest on, I think some assumptions that people have in Minnesota that government should work for the people and that government should function efficiently and effectively and there's still a belief in this state, for whatever reason, that that's possible. People haven't given up on their government. Which I think is really a huge asset for the state. Because, as long as people continue to stay involved and work with problems, I think then you have hope that you can solve them. But, part of it is a culture of accountability in government, a culture of responsibility that exists pretty much everywhere in the state. I think the other thing is it's not just at the state level, obviously, local elected officials feel very engaged and very involved in looking at how things are going in their community, how things could work better and they expect, the people of Minnesota expect the government people to work things out and make things happen. Earlier today we were just talking about how Minnesota is used to having bad weather. We were talking earlier with you, Laurie, and with others, about how all the bad winter storms that have hit the east coast have been so difficult and I was kind of joking and saying, you know, we're used to that in Minnesota. I do think that sometimes when you live in a state where there are ongoing challenges and winter is a challenge. You've got to, you have a lot of obstacles to getting out and getting things done and people have to learn to work together and get things taken care of that are kind of a pain in the neck, but they need to do it and they learn to do it and they help each other out and there is still that ethic of "we're in this together." And that all sounds kind of pie in the sky, but it's real, you can kind of see it for yourself and it makes all the difference in the world because people are willing to stick with it and get the job done. And gain, the citizens expect government to do that. That's not above and beyond, that's part of your job when you work for the government of Minnesota. Whether that's local or state. Whatever level you work at.

[Laurie Harrington] In the end, do you think the NTAR Leadership Center's SLII effort will make a difference in Minnesota's ability to help people with disabilities to have better employment opportunities?



[Kathy Sweeney] Oh, I'm absolutely convinced that the SLII effort has been very important for us. We have learned so many different kinds of new ideas and had an opportunity to network with other state that have had breakthrough that we did not have that we could learn from, from others, from the Heldrich Center. I think a good example of that is that in 1993, when we set up the Minnesota workforce system here, we wanted to make it possible for the workforce centers to be able to serve all different kinds of customers well. But we didn't have the tools that we have today with universal design and with what we've been doing with SLII about universal design and how it has evolved to where it is today. We're in a position where, as long as we're willing to learn, which we are. However well we're doing, we always know we could do better and we don't want to get lackadaisical in our approach. Universal design is an example of helping us do something we've always wanted to do, but now helping us to do it better and helping us to learn from others who are ahead of us on that road. That's just one example, but it's a good one, I think, and it's got lot of applications. We've got 49 workforce centers, so when you can change a system like that with that much reach, you can really make a difference.

[Laurie Harrington] Thank you for Kathy, for speaking with us today. I've been speaking with Kathy Sweeney, the designated team leader for the Minnesota SLII team and the Strategic Projects Manager at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. 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.

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