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UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 8 P.M., WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22

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## **DISABILITY ADVOCATES SUPPORT NEW STATEWIDE EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE**

Madison, WI – Disability advocates who support employment of people with disabilities in the community at typical wages welcomed Governor Scott Walker’s announcement at Wednesday’s State of the State address, marking a new statewide initiative to improve employment rates for Wisconsin residents with disabilities.

The announcement, which Gov. Walker said would call on both state government and Wisconsin businesses to tap into the state’s vast pool of potential workers with disabilities who want to work, is good news for Cindy Bentley, Executive Director of People First Wisconsin.

“We want people with intellectual disabilities to be working in their community. We want people to have meaningful jobs and also making a decent wage,” Bentley said. “We do not want people with intellectual disabilities to be working in segregated facilities or living in segregated settings. We want them living and working in their community.”

Bentley and Beth Swedeen, Executive Director with the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD), said improving integrated employment statewide is a top priority for both their organizations.

“The [data](#) is clear that people with disabilities are drastically under-utilized and unemployed compared with the general population,” Swedeen said. “Yet, research also clearly shows that when people with disabilities work at the right job with the right supports, they make significant contributions, are less reliant on public benefits, and are healthier and happier about their lives.”

Swedeen pointed to BPDD board member Patrick Young, a Germantown resident and 8-year employee of Tailored Label Products in Menomonee Falls. Young and his employer were in attendance and were recognized by the Governor for his success on the job.

“Patrick is a perfect example of what we would like to see in the Governor’s initiative: a successful employee who is working in a competitive business for competitive wages. Patrick has had regular pay increases, has learned more skills over time, and is less reliant on public benefits.”

Lisa Pugh, policy coordinator with Disability Rights Wisconsin, said Wisconsin can take targeted steps toward significantly increasing its employment rate for people with disabilities, which currently stands at 18.7%, compared with a 68.3% rate for the general working-age adult population.

Efforts like setting employment performance targets in state programs, changing state use contracting policies so for-profit businesses that employ people with disabilities can participate, and developing business-to-business mentorships are all steps the state can take to improve employment rates, Pugh said.

“With the Governor’s announcement, Wisconsin has an opportunity to become a model state employer while working with the business community to significantly increase our overall employment rate of people with disabilities,” Pugh said.

The Governor also recognized successful Wisconsin projects in his speech, including Project Search and the Walgreen’s Retail Employees with Disabilities Initiative.

“In addition, exciting federal youth employment grants like Let’s Get to Work and the PROMISE grant, make now the opportune time to significantly improve Wisconsin’s integrated employment rates for people with disabilities,” Pugh said.

Additional Wisconsin employment statistics are available in the “[Ready, Willing, and Able to Work](#)” fact sheet.

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