Good Morning

It’s my pleasure to welcome you to today’s conference. It’s wonderful to see such a big turn-out and this level of interest in employment and the ways we can continue to create and expand opportunities for individuals with ID and DD to become part of the mainstream workforce - with all the benefits that come along with that – including increased income, co-worker relationships, friendships, increased independence, confidence, new skills, and having valued social roles in the community.

I want to thank the staff of the Institute for Community Inclusion (under the leadership of Cindy Thomas) for the major role they played in planning today’s conference, and also want to thank members of the planning committee for their involvement in helping shape today’s agenda. I also want to recognize and acknowledge all of the presenters who have generously agreed to share their expertise and experiences – I think there is an impressive and robust array of workshop offerings.

When I think about our work on employment I think that together we are making history here in Massachusetts! It was just about 3 years ago, in November 2013, that we adopted our plan, “Blueprint for Success: Employing Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities in Massachusetts.” Through this collaborative planning effort we outlined a series of goals and steps we would take through June of 2018 to expand integrated employment opportunities, we identified the resources needed and the strategies that would support these changes.

I think that we can all feel proud that we have achieved several major milestones in the transformation of our employment and day services!!

- As of July 1st of this year we met our goal of closing all sheltered workshop programs – and we are only the 4th state in the country to have accomplished this. This is an important step forward. During this time period almost 3,000 people were assisted to transition to employment and/or community based day support services.
- There are now more people working in individual jobs in the community than ever before - almost 3,000 individuals.
- There are more than 3,300 individuals working in group supported employment – an increase of over 1,300 people since June 2013. And we are seeing growth in the number of people earning minimum wage or higher in these jobs (about 60%) - this is a very positive trend and something we would like to see continue as we are committed to helping all individuals be employed in positions where they are earning at least minimum wage.
- As expected, many people transitioned to Community Based Day Support programs. About half of the participants in these services spend part of their week working at a job, and about 50% attend full-time. These programs are changing and evolving in order to provide more people a pathway to employment and a diverse array of opportunities for meaningful participation in the community.

It truly has been a collective effort - this progress could not have occurred without the commitment and resourcefulness of our provider agencies, the efforts of DDS regional, area and central office DDS staff, and most importantly the resilience of the individuals we support, who have been willing to take on new challenges and be open to new opportunities. We would not have been able to do this without the understanding and assistance of families who have helped these changes become a reality. It is truly the
successful experiences of individuals working in a variety of jobs and businesses that is changing expectations of employers and helping pave the way for increased opportunities.

I specifically want to acknowledge several key partners who embraced the values, vision and leadership to support these changes and have worked in strong partnership with us: ADDP; The Arc of Massachusetts, MASS, Mass Families Organizing for Change, the Mass Down Syndrome Congress, AFAM and the great work by the Employment Workgroup.

As we developed our plan we also identified a number of challenges that would have to be addressed to make these changes possible. We recognized that additional funding would be needed to offer more individualized and integrated services- and expansion funding over 2 fiscal years made it possible for many people to move into new services. Though we are now facing some budget challenges, which may slow down the pace of changes that can be made, we remain committed to our original goals and will continue to advocate for additional funding in future years.

One of the things we did was to take a pro-active approach by investing in a variety of capacity building initiatives through our partnership with ICI. I think these have made an important difference.

Over the past 2 ½ years:
- About 1,000 staff have participated in employment training opportunities that have been offered. A rich array of offerings have been made available ranging from the comprehensive, 6-day employment specialist series to 2-day program manager workshops, to full-day trainings on CBDS, to webinars on a variety of topics.
- Twenty-five provider agencies have taken advantage of consultation services to assist them in their organizational transformation and program re-design and development.
- And there are now six Regional Employment Collaboratives across the state under the leadership of Riverside Community Care with employer liaisons who reach out to the business community and work in partnership with job developers to identify and streamline access to job opportunities. This past fiscal year through these collaborative efforts more than 700 people were assisted to find jobs, including 425 individuals supported by DDS.

All of us know the transformation of our services to offer integrated employment and inclusive community experiences is the right thing to do- but it’s also affirming to know the changes we have been engaged in here in Massachusetts are in alignment with major national policy changes and directives. The US Department of Justice just recently issued guidance on the application of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Olmstead decision as it relates to employment. This guidance clearly states that individuals need to be supported to work in the most integrated settings, that is, a typical job in the community like individuals without disabilities and enabling interactions with nondisabled persons to the fullest extent possible. And the “Community Rule” issued by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services requires state agencies to provide services to individuals in inclusive settings in the community, using generic resources, to promote independence and foster meaningful participation and relationships.

Though we have made good progress –we know there is much more work to do. We are just a little more than halfway into the plan outlined in our Blueprint for employment and we recognize that phasing out sheltered work is only one of many steps in this journey ....
So what are some of the major priorities moving forward:

- We must continue to make employment a reality for more and more individuals - focusing on increasing the quality and diversity of jobs, with more hours, higher wages, and in different business sectors.

- We must focus on the future generation of workers - transition age youth and young adults so they can be assisted to move directly from school into integrated employment. We value our partnerships with MRC and MCB, and look forward to further developing and strengthening our work together to jointly support transition age individuals to access and obtain jobs. I believe the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act will provide more opportunities for us to work together collectively in these efforts.

- And while talking about transition age youth I’m pleased to announce we received a five year federal grant focused on system changes to promote and support transition-age youth with ID to get on a career path to employment - the Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment. This is an exciting opportunity that will bring together MRC, DESE, and Labor and Workforce Development along with many other partners, to support policies and promising practices that will help promote students moving directly into integrated jobs, after school or into post-secondary options that will lead to employment.

- And there must be a strong emphasis and support for the evolving development of community based day support services to be a pathway to employment and offer meaningful and productive engagement in community life, including promotion of innovative approaches to provide internships and job skill training opportunities.

In closing, I again want to acknowledge and applaud the progress we have collectively made and the hard work everyone has been engaged in. And I hope that each of you will join me in committing to sustain this momentum and in continuing to create a state-of-the-art service and support system for making employment and full engagement in community life a reality for all.

Thank you.