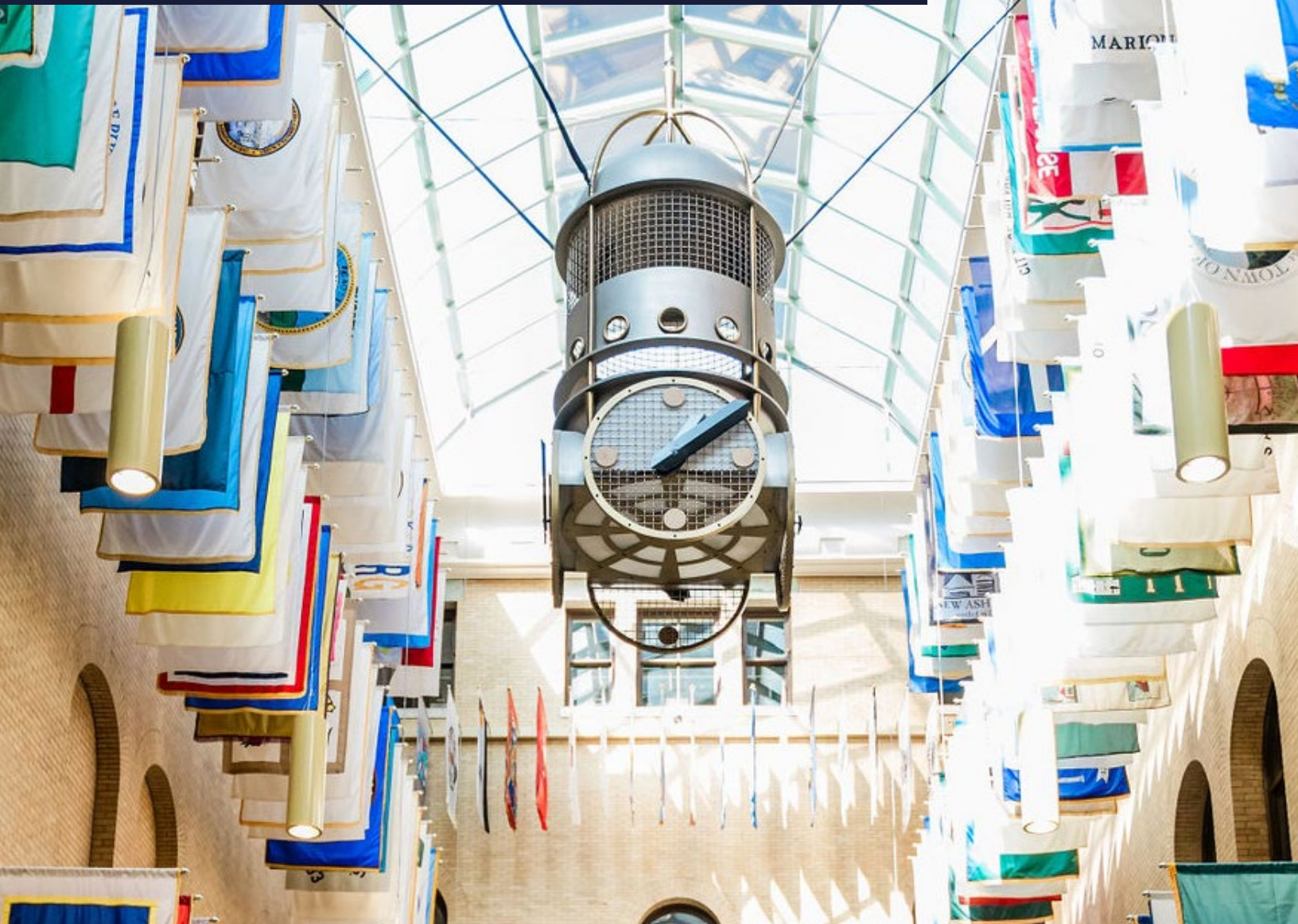


# The Massachusetts Permanent Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities

OCTOBER 2024



MASSACHUSETTS



COMMISSION ON THE STATUS  
OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

## FY24 Annual Report

**REPORTING PERIOD:** July 2023 – June 2024  
(As of October 2024)



## Special Thanks

*Gateway Arts. Artwork featured in this report is made by adult artists with disabilities. Learn more about the organization and its artists [here](#).*



Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Barbara Brown. (2017)

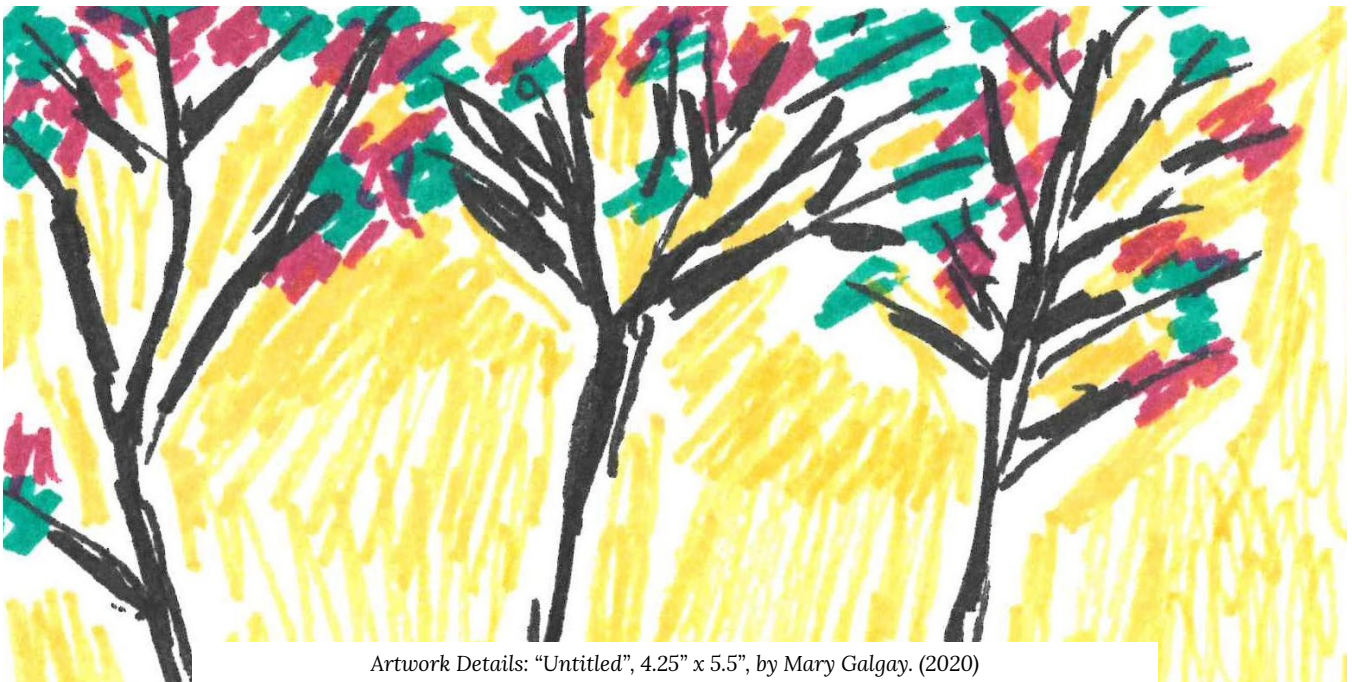


## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities Membership would like to thank individuals with disabilities, service providers, other state agencies, family members and caregivers, advocates, and local disability commissions for their collaboration and partnership.

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Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Mary Galgay. (2020)



# I. Executive Summary



Artwork Details: "Summer Drawing", 8.25" x 10.5", by Beatrice Farah. (2023)



## Introduction

The Permanent Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities works to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities throughout the Commonwealth. The scope of the Commission's work includes examining ways to improve employment and transportation, assessing data and disparities, encouraging inclusion of persons with disabilities as employees and vendors within the private and public sector workforce, assessing programs and practices in all state agencies as they affect persons with disabilities, advising the legislative and executive branches, and promoting and facilitating collaboration among local disability commissions, disability rights advocacy organizations, and disability employment service providers. The Commission brings together key stakeholders to address critical issues impacting people with disabilities, with a focus on promoting inclusion, accessibility, and opportunities for all.

During the 2023-2024 fiscal period, the Commission prioritized discussing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and those working in disability services and improving educational outcomes. This report provides a summary of our major achievements, challenges, ongoing projects, and key collaborations. By sharing insights, statistics, and impact metrics, we highlight the progress made toward enabling individuals with disabilities to fully engage in all aspects of community life.

## At a Glance

**Employment Initiatives:** The Commission worked closely with the Department of Economic Research of the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development to learn more about enhancing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities using data from the People with Disabilities Equity Dashboard. Despite efforts to promote diversity, **only 38% of people with disabilities in Massachusetts participated in the labor force compared to 77% of individuals without disabilities.**<sup>1</sup> Barriers such as lack of workplace accommodations, discrimination, and inadequate transportation remain major challenges. Additionally, the median earnings for people with disabilities were \$27,000, compared to \$50,000 for individuals without disabilities, highlighting an income disparity that persists across industries. Individuals with disabilities are particularly underrepresented in high-growth sectors such as technology (2.5%) and healthcare (3.8%).

**Benefit Cliff:** A significant barrier to career growth for individuals with disabilities remains the "benefit cliff." This cliff occurs when individuals lose essential benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, or other critical support services, when their income exceeds specific eligibility thresholds. As individuals strive to advance their careers, the risk of losing these benefits can outweigh the perceived benefits of earning more income, ultimately discouraging career progression and economic self-sufficiency.

**Workforce Supports:** The workforce crisis in disability services is a pressing challenge, as approximately **40%** of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) rely on public assistance due to low wages, averaging **\$16.89** per hour, which often prove insufficient to meet basic living expenses. This leads to high turnover rates, affecting the quality and continuity of services provided to individuals with disabilities, as consistent and qualified support staff are crucial for ensuring stable and effective care.

**Harvard Graduate School of Education Capstone Collaboration:** The Commission partnered with Harvard Graduate School of Education to analyze transition and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Findings indicated substantial gaps in service access, employment programs, and family engagement. **Only 36.9% of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) enrolled in higher education post-graduation, compared to 82.1% of their peers without disabilities.** 41.6% of students with disabilities found competitive employment after graduation, compared to 90.1% of students without disabilities. Recommendations included enhancing educator training, appointing transition coordinators, and improving data collection to support students transitioning to post-secondary education and employment.

**National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM):** The Commission hosted its inaugural NDEAM celebration, attended by nearly 200 participants, to recognize inclusive employers and celebrate the contributions of employees with disabilities as well as honoring legislative champions. During that month, the Commission hosted a series of impactful events focused on advancing disability employment, clarifying misconceptions around employment and benefits, and addressing critical workforce challenges.

## Looking Ahead

In FY2025, the Commission plans to continue building on our work by expanding initiatives that focus on either health, transportation, and housing accessibility, while also introducing innovative approaches to employment and workforce support. Through collaboration with stakeholders and strategic planning, we aim to further advance opportunities for individuals with disabilities across all sectors.

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**FOOTNOTE:** <sup>1</sup> "Participated in the labor force" refers to the percentage of people who are either employed or actively seeking employment, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

## II. Commission Membership and Structure



Artwork Details: "Summer Drawing", 8.25" x 10.5", by Chuck Johnson. (2023)

## **Commission Membership**

The following individuals currently serve as commissioners, bringing a wealth of expertise and dedication to advancing the work of the Commission:

**Gyasi Burks-Abbott, Self-Advocate, Faculty**

LEND Program, Boston Children's Hospital and UMass Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion  
*Appointed by the Governor*

**Charles Carr, Legislative & Budget Subcommittee Co-Chair**

Disability Policy Consortium Legislative Liaison  
*Appointed by Disability Policy Consortium*

**Representative Gerard Cassidy, State Representative**

Massachusetts House of Representatives  
*Appointed by the Speaker of the House*

**Representative Denise Garlick, Chair, State Representative**

Massachusetts House of Representatives  
*Appointed by the Speaker of the House*

**Nancy Garr-Colzie, Member & Board Chair**

Worcester Disability Commission, Center for Living & Working  
*Appointed by the Governor*

**Craig Hall, Executive Director**

Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council  
*Appointed by Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council*

**Representative Kay Khan, State Representative**

Massachusetts House of Representatives  
*Appointed by the Speaker of the House*

**Andrew Levraut, Deputy General Counsel**

Disabled Persons Protection Commission  
*Appointed by Disabled Persons Protection Commission*

**Ann Lynch, Assistant Attorney General, Disability Rights Coordinator**

Massachusetts Attorney General's Office  
*Appointed by the Attorney General's Office*

**Regina Marshall, Chief Operating Officer**

Advocates  
*Appointed by the Senate President*

**Felix Martinez**

*Appointed by the Governor*

**Oswald Mondejar, Clerk, President**

Mucho Gusto Consulting  
*Appointed by the Governor*

**Representative Mathew Muratore, State Representative**

Massachusetts House of Representatives  
*Appointed by the House Minority Leader*

**Bridget Murphy, Project Manager**

Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, William Francis Galvin  
*Appointed by the State Secretary*

**Senator Patrick O'Connor, State Senator**

Massachusetts Senate  
*Appointed by the Senate Minority Leader*

**Angela Ortiz, Workforce Supports Subcommittee Chair, Executive Director**

Massachusetts Health Council  
*Appointed by the Governor*



## Commission Membership (Continued)

### **Kathy Petkauskos, Disability Employment Subcommittee Chair, Executive Director**

Work Without Limits, ForHealth Consulting, University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School  
*Appointed by the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School*

### **Carl Richardson, Legislative & Budget Subcommittee Co-Chair, Treasurer, ADA Coordinator/504 Diversity Officer**

Massachusetts State House  
*Appointed by the Senate President*

### **Lexi Semanchik, HR Marketing & Communications Specialist**

State Treasurer and Receiver General's Office  
*Treasurer's Office Designee*

### **Rachel Stanton, Investor Relations & Communications Designer**

Clean Water Trust | Debt Management  
*Treasurer's Office Designee*

### **Meghan Todd, Grants Manager**

City of Framingham  
*Appointed by the Senate President*

### **Christopher T. S. White, Ed.D., Vice-Chair, President/CEO**

Road to Responsibility, Inc.  
*Appointed by the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers, Inc.*

## Commissioners Emeriti

*Carla Kath, Nancy Rumbolt-Trzcisnki, Dan Shannon, Paul W. Spooner, Kerry Thompson, Melinda Troy, Liz Zelnick.*

The Commission held multiple public meetings throughout the year, providing a platform for stakeholders to share their concerns and contribute feedback on Commission initiatives. The Commission convenes quarterly, with subcommittees meeting in the months when the full Commission does not meet. All meetings are livestreamed on the Massachusetts Legislature's website, recorded, and include American Sign Language (ASL) and Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART) services. The meetings actively engage participants through a Q&A feature, ensuring an interactive and inclusive experience. Minutes from these meetings can be accessed on our [website](#).

The Commission was divided into three primary subcommittees:

**Disability Employment Subcommittee:** This subcommittee collects data and analyzes initiatives that increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in private employment and in state government.

**Workforce Supports Subcommittee:** This subcommittee collects data and analyzes initiatives that address the workforce crisis for people who provide services to individuals with disabilities.

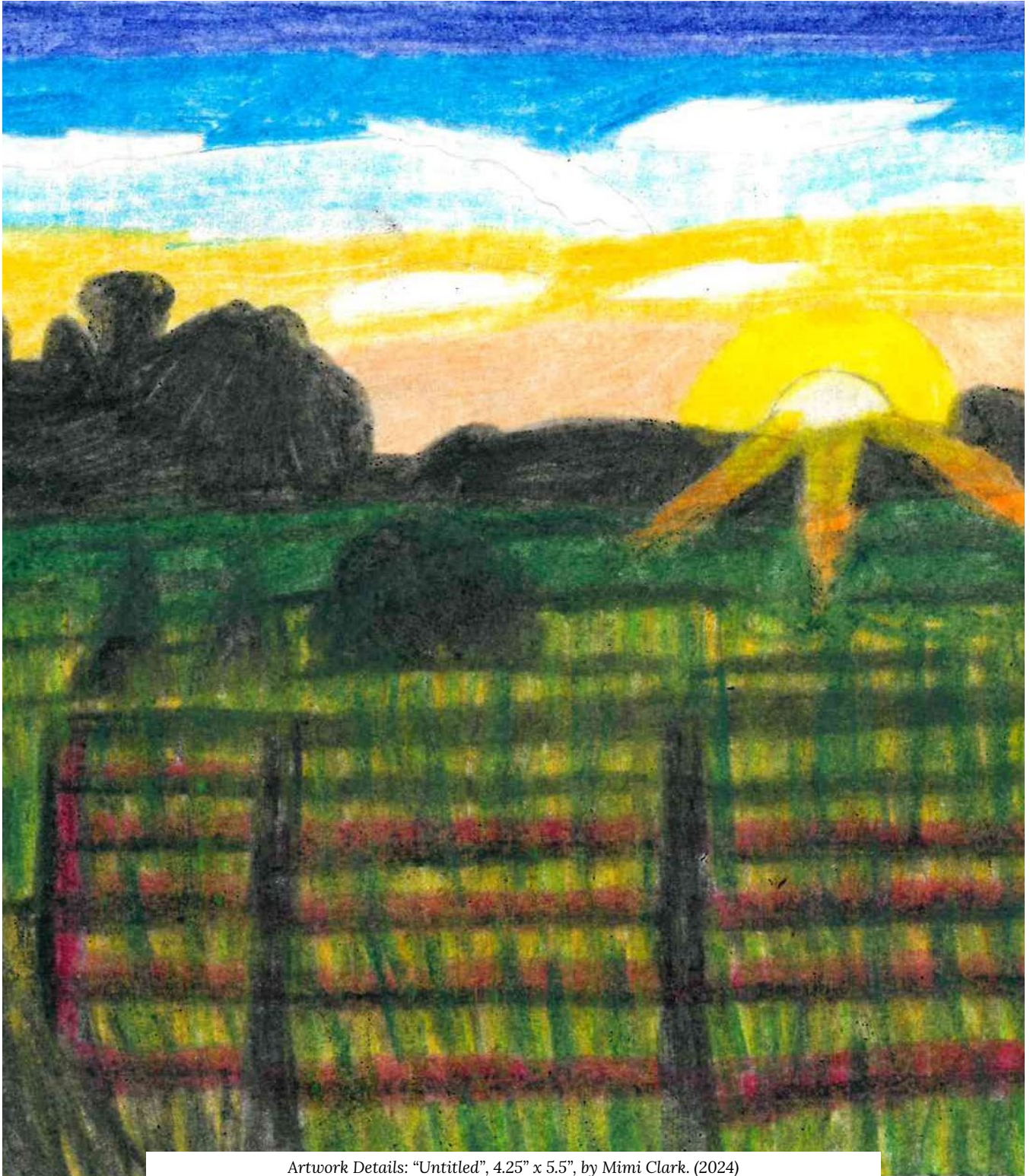
**Legislative and Budget Subcommittee:** This subcommittee serves as a clearinghouse of legislative and budget priorities for the Commission, tracks those priorities, and provides regular updates to the full Commission on legislative and budget activity.



**Above:** Photograph from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.



### III. Partnerships and Collaborations: Key Statistics and Analysis



Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Mimi Clark. (2024)



**Above:** Photographs from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.

## Department of Economic Research

A major highlight this past year has been collaborating with the Department of Economic Research (DER), whose insights, such as the labor landscape for individuals with disabilities, Benefit Cliff Analysis, and analysis of the Massachusetts Executive Branch as a state employer, have helped the Commission understand issues and identify potential solutions to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The DER dashboard now serves as a valuable tool, enabling data-driven discussions on long-term employment solutions and trends affecting this community.

### MA EXECUTIVE BRANCH AS A STATE EMPLOYER KEY STATISTICS

**Commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, and Growth in Employment:** The Massachusetts Executive Branch has shown a strong commitment to diversity by actively hiring individuals with disabilities. As of Q4 FY2024, approximately **1,550 employees (3.4%)** identified as having a disability, a proportion higher than the average in the broader economy. The number of employees identifying as having a disability has increased by **20% since Q1 2022**, indicating positive growth in diversity within the state workforce.

**Training and Support Programs:** The Executive Branch offers various training and support programs aimed at creating an inclusive environment for employees with disabilities. These programs include sensitivity training for staff and supervisors, as well as resources to support reasonable workplace accommodations.

**Higher Earnings and Long Tenure:** Employees with disabilities are more likely to earn between **\$75,000 and \$100,000** annually and have longer tenure, with more than **75%** of these employees having worked for the Commonwealth for over 10 years. This highlights the supportive environment that encourages long-term retention.

**Benefit Cliff Issues:** A key finding from the analysis highlights the existence of a “benefit cliff” where employees with disabilities may lose critical public benefits as their income increases. For instance, **SSDI benefits** are terminated once annual earnings reach **\$18,600**, creating a significant disincentive for career growth and advancement.

**Underrepresentation in Certain Departments:** The representation of employees with disabilities varies significantly across departments. For example, only **1.1%** of employees in Public Safety and Homeland Security identify as having a disability, whereas **9.1%** are employed in Labor and Workforce Development. This disparity points to uneven inclusion efforts across different sectors.

**Age Disparity:** Younger individuals with disabilities, particularly those aged **20-30**, are significantly underrepresented in the state workforce. Only **2%** of state employees in this age group identify as having a disability, compared to **17%** of the employed population with a disability in Massachusetts. This suggests a need for targeted recruitment efforts to attract younger talent.

### BENEFIT CLIFF KEY STATISTICS

**Income Levels and Benefit Loss:** The data shows that employees earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 annually are most at risk of experiencing a net loss in overall income due to benefit reductions.

**State Employees with Disabilities:** Approximately 15% of state employees with disabilities face a benefit cliff as their salaries increase beyond certain thresholds.

**Impact on Career Growth:** Due to the benefit cliff, state employees with disabilities are less likely to seek promotions or new opportunities that would result in a marginal increase in income but a significant loss of benefits.



## People with Disabilities in Massachusetts Labor Force Key Statistics

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

**Labor Force Disparity:** The analysis showed that people with disabilities in Massachusetts have a significantly lower labor force participation rate compared to individuals without disabilities. As of the most recent data, only **38%** of people with disabilities were actively participating in the labor force, compared to **77%** of individuals without disabilities.

### BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

**Access to Accommodations:** Many individuals with disabilities reported facing challenges in accessing reasonable workplace accommodations, which limits their ability to obtain or retain employment.

**Discrimination and Stigma:** The analysis also noted ongoing issues related to discrimination and stigma, which act as major barriers to employment for people with disabilities. Employers' lack of awareness or reluctance to provide necessary accommodations contributes to lower hiring rates.

**Lack of Accessible Transportation:** Transportation remains a significant barrier, preventing many individuals with disabilities from accessing employment opportunities, especially in areas not well-served by public transit.

### People with Disabilities Equity Dashboard

[The People with Disabilities Equity Dashboard](#) provides real-time data on employment trends, disparities, and progress for people with disabilities in Massachusetts. Key information of the dashboard includes:

**Median Earnings:** The median earnings for people with disabilities are **\$27,000**, compared to **\$50,000** for individuals without disabilities, reflecting an income disparity that persists across industries and occupations.

**Representation in High-Growth Sectors:** Individuals with disabilities are underrepresented in high-growth sectors such as technology and healthcare, where the labor force participation is **less than 5%** for people with disabilities.

### INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC TAKEAWAYS

**Healthcare:** Although the healthcare sector is a significant employer in Massachusetts, people with disabilities represent only **3.8%** of this sector's workforce. This underrepresentation signals potential barriers to entry, such as inaccessible training programs or limited accommodations.

**Technology:** **2.5%** of people with disabilities are employed in the tech sector. This suggests a need for more inclusive hiring practices, as well as accessible skills training and certification programs, in this industry that is experiencing rapid growth.

**Manufacturing:** In the manufacturing sector, people with disabilities make up **5.2%** of the workforce. Despite relatively better representation compared to other high-growth sectors, the industry still has room for improvement in making workplaces accessible and offering accommodations.

**Retail and Hospitality:** Retail and hospitality sectors show slightly higher representation of people with disabilities, with **6.7%** of the workforce identifying as having a disability. This is partly due to the availability of entry-level positions; however, opportunities for career advancement remain limited.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Implement Gradual Benefit Reduction:** Transition to a gradual benefit reduction model to prevent benefit cliffs, allowing employees with disabilities to increase earnings without the sudden loss of essential supports.

**Enhance Employer Training on Disability Inclusion:** Provide comprehensive training on disability inclusion, reasonable accommodations, and ADA obligations to ensure workplaces are prepared to support a diverse workforce.

**Create Incentives for Inclusive Hiring:** Offer tax credits and grants to employers who actively recruit and hire individuals with disabilities, reducing unemployment gaps and supporting workplace diversity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

**Expand Accessible Training Programs:** Develop targeted skill-building programs in high-growth fields like tech and healthcare, improving representation and career opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

**Massachusetts as a Model Employer:** Address the benefit cliff by offering supplemental supports to state employees with disabilities, promoting career advancement, while maintaining financial stability, and increasing representation across departments.

DER reports can be accessed [here](#).

## Harvard Graduate School of Education Capstone Collaboration: Transition and Post-School Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

The Commission's mandate includes studying, reviewing, advising, and reporting on initiatives to develop school-to-work programs for transition-aged youth with disabilities that establish a bridge to self-sufficiency and engage school supports, family members, and employers. In this effort, we partnered with Harvard Graduate School of Education students to spotlight the critical challenges faced by Massachusetts students with disabilities as they transition to post-secondary education and employment. The findings reveal substantial gaps in service access, employment programs, and family engagement, resulting in unequal opportunities compared to peers without disabilities. Recommendations call for enhanced educator training, stronger collaboration through dedicated transition coordinators, and improved data collection to address these gaps and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

### KEY FINDINGS

**Outcome Data (2022):** Approximately 36.9% of students with IEPs enrolled in higher education post-graduation, while 41.6% found competitive employment. In comparison, 82.1% of students without disabilities enrolled in higher education post-graduation, and 90.1% found competitive employment. Additionally, 94.7% of students without disabilities graduated high school, highlighting significant disparities in outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Stakeholder Perspectives:** Interviewed stakeholders who emphasized inconsistent communication across districts and limited understanding of transition services by educators as major issues. Specifically, stakeholders noted that the lack of standardized practices and fragmented communication channels led to varying levels of support across districts, which in turn affected the quality of services students received. Educators were often unaware of the full range of transition resources available, resulting in missed opportunities for students with disabilities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Enhanced Training for Educators and Families:** Mandate continuous training for educators and families on transition services, including digital and in-person resources like "Charting the Life Course." This training should focus on understanding transition goals, available resources, and strategies for empowering students with disabilities.

**State-Level Transition Coordinators and Liaisons:** Appoint dedicated transition coordinators and district liaisons to ensure consistency and quality in the implementation of transition services across districts. These coordinators will also serve as points of contact for families and educators, providing clear guidance and improving communication.

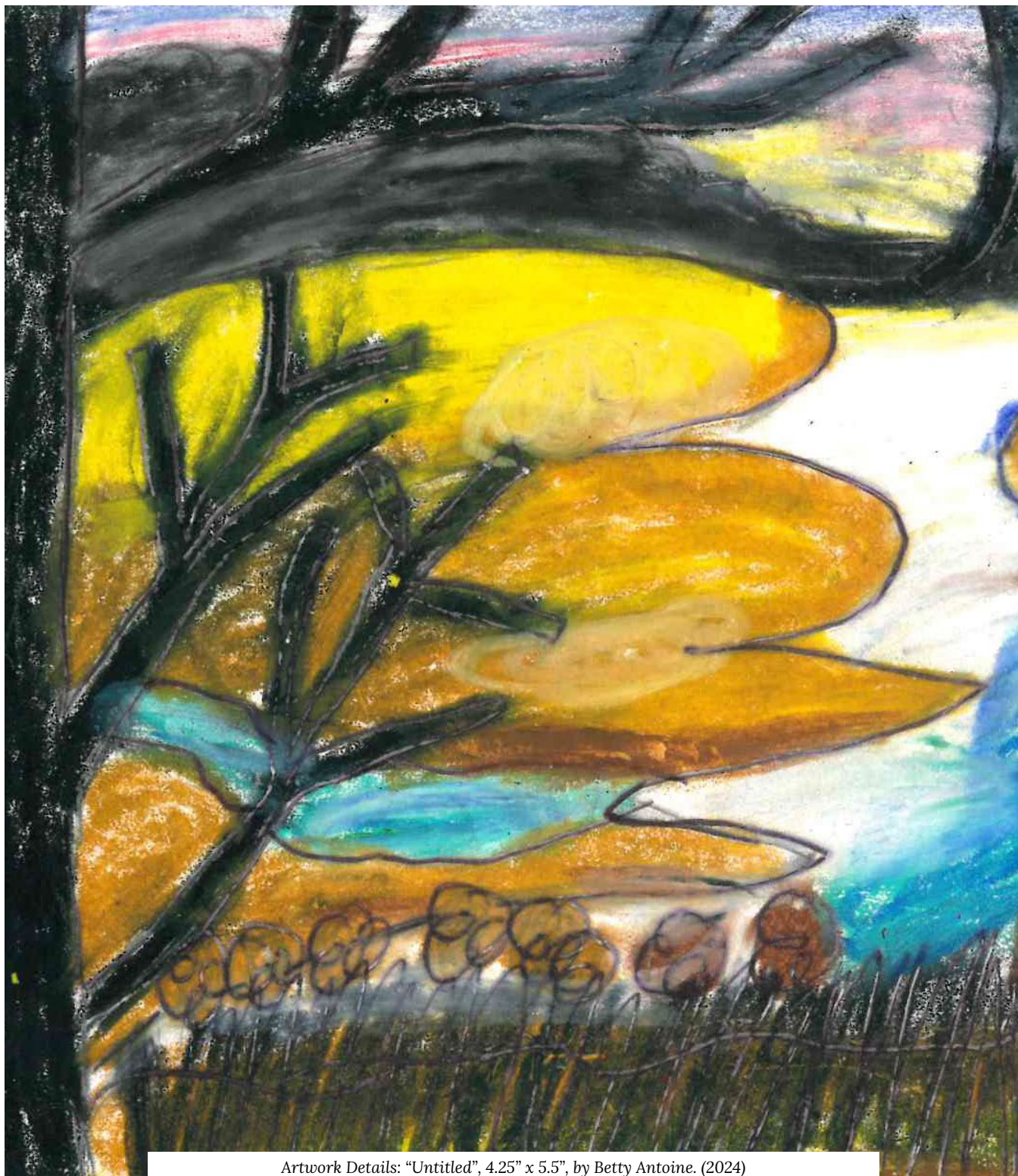
**Improving Data Collection and Usage:** Form a data task force to gather detailed information on job satisfaction, income, and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. This data should include demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender to better understand and address specific challenges.

**Learning from Successful States:** Massachusetts should adopt best practices from states like Connecticut and Maryland, which have developed effective frameworks for transition services. For example, Connecticut's use of State Education Resource Centers and Maryland's statewide transition specialists have shown success in supporting students with disabilities more effectively.

The full report can be accessed [here](#).



## IV. Subcommittee Activities and Initiatives



Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Betty Antoine. (2024)

## Disability Employment Subcommittee

### KEY ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

**Employer Engagement and Education:** The subcommittee has prioritized planning to educate small and medium businesses about the value of including people with disabilities in the workforce. A major focus of this effort is the Employer and Employee Perspective Video Project, which aims to feature successful employers who have hired and supported employees with disabilities. The goal is to identify and facilitate at least one opportunity (e.g., event, speaking engagement, information dissemination) to engage and educate at least 100 small and medium businesses/employers on the value of including people with disabilities in the workplace, available community resources, and recognition of effective employer practices. The video will be distributed through Chambers of Commerce, small businesses, and other relevant organizations to promote inclusive hiring. Highlighting three employers: The video, featuring MicroTek, Inc., Old Colony YMCA Plymouth, and the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston, highlights the benefits of disability-inclusive hiring and offers valuable insights to employers. These organizations are recognized for their leadership in demonstrating how inclusive practices create meaningful benefits for everyone. The subcommittee's plan is also to create a resource guide that includes best practice guides, information on the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC), and access to educational and training programs. This guide is designed to support employers at any stage of their inclusion journey, providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to build a diverse and inclusive workforce. At the time of this report, the video and resource guide were launched at our annual National Disability employment Awareness Month celebration and can be accessed [here](#).

**Addressing the Benefits Cliff:** The subcommittee heard from [MassAbility](#) regarding the "benefits cliff," a challenge where individuals lose critical benefits when their income exceeds specific thresholds, discouraging career progression. To address this, MassAbility launched the "Runway to Careers" pilot program. This initiative supports beneficiaries of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in transitioning to livable wage jobs by providing skill-building opportunities, such as apprenticeships and internships, while advocating for policy changes that enable individuals to retain their benefits during the transition period. The project aligns with Massachusetts's "Learn to Earn" initiative, established in FY18 under the Baker administration, which aims to create sustainable career pathways for individuals with disabilities. The subcommittee and the full Commission maintain regular check-ins with MassAbility to ensure efforts are aligned, not duplicative, and to share data and resources effectively.

**Massachusetts Supplier Diversity Office (SDO) Pilot:** The Massachusetts Supplier Diversity Office (SDO) introduced a pilot initiative to connect disability-owned businesses with state procurement opportunities. This pilot aligns directly with the Disability Employment Subcommittee's goals by promoting economic opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Since its launch, participation of disability-owned business enterprises (DOBEs) in state procurement has increased by 34%. The SDO works in collaboration with [Disability:IN](#) and the [Massachusetts Office on Disability \(MOD\)](#) to provide certifications, support, and establish pilot program policies and guidelines for disability-owned and service-disabled, veteran-owned businesses, helping them compete more effectively. From FY20 to FY22, there has been a 33% increase in the certification of DOBEs, highlighting the positive impact of these efforts on fostering greater inclusivity in state contracts.

### CHALLENGES

**Cliff Effect:** The benefits cliff remains a significant concern for many individuals with disabilities. The fear of losing benefits such as SSI, SSDI, SNAP, or healthcare if they earn more discourages people from pursuing career advancement.

**Consistency in Messaging:** Ensuring consistent and inclusive messaging when engaging with businesses is crucial to breaking stereotypes and encouraging the employment of individuals with disabilities. The subcommittee has worked on using success stories and testimonials from both employers and employees to promote the value of disability-inclusive hiring practices.

### NEXT STEPS

**1:** Leveraging the three businesses highlighted in the video project, hold a virtual forum for other small/mid-sized businesses to learn from their experiences.

**2:** Take a leadership role in the benefits cliff discussion that is happening on multiple levels, i.e., with MassAbility, EOLWD, and Commonwealth Corporation.



## Workforce Supports Subcommittee

The Workforce Supports Subcommittee has been actively analyzing the workforce crisis impacting the provision of services to individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts by hosting key stakeholders to learn more about the issues, short-term solutions, and long-term strategies.

### KEY ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

**Stakeholder Engagement on Workforce Crisis:** The subcommittee held a meeting with key stakeholders to discuss the workforce crisis affecting disability services. Panelists included representatives from the Disability Law Center, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Providers' Council, and the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers.

The following was shared:

#### Unmet Needs for Day Habilitation Services

- Approximately 13% of individuals with high support needs have been unable to return to day habilitation services.
- This unmet need is contributing to a significant gap in care and worsening the workforce crisis. Learn more [here](#) and [here](#).

#### Low Wages for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs)

- The average hourly wage for DSPs in Massachusetts is \$16.89, which is below the living wage in the state.
- This financial challenge contributes to high turnover and staffing shortages, as many DSPs struggle to make ends meet.
- Approximately 40% of DSPs rely on public assistance due to low wages. Learn more [here](#).

#### Service Reductions Due to Workforce Shortages

- Due to staffing shortages, 25% of agencies have had to reduce or suspend services.
- These disruptions have significantly affected individuals with disabilities who rely on day habilitation and other essential services. Learn more [here](#).

#### Need for Cross-Agency Collaboration

- The discussions underscored the need for cross-agency coordination to alleviate caregiver burnout and ensure continuity of care.
- Coordinated strategies are necessary to address workforce shortages and improve service delivery for individuals with significant disabilities.

**Direct Support Professional (DSP) Workforce Survey and Data Analysis:** The subcommittee collaborated with the Human Services Research Institute (HSRI) to gather and analyze data on the workforce crisis, including turnover and tenure of DSPs. According to the 2021 NCI-IDD State of the Workforce Survey, Massachusetts has an average turnover rate of 31.4% for DSPs, compared to a national average of 43.3%. Vacancy rates for full-time DSPs in Massachusetts stood at 18.8%, higher than the East Coast peers' benchmark of 17.0%. Learn more [here](#).

**Professionalizing the Role of DSPs:** The subcommittee has been exploring ways to professionalize DSP roles through credentialing and partnerships with community colleges. This initiative aims to improve DSP retention by offering a standardized credential program and enhancing job satisfaction. During ongoing discussions with HSRI, the subcommittee analyzed New York's SUNY program as a potential model. The SUNY program has successfully implemented standardized training and certificates, resulting in improved DSP retention and wage increases. SUNY's credentialing initiative, which includes partnerships with State Universities of New York, focuses on recruiting, strengthening, and developing DSP career paths. Additionally, the program provides opportunities for DSPs to earn certificates and advance within their career, contributing to better wages and higher retention rates. Learn more [here](#).

**Caregiver to Caregiver (C2C) Respite Network:** The subcommittee supported the development of the C2C Respite Network, a peer-to-peer respite program for caregivers of Children and Youth with Special Health Needs (CYSHN) from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. This initiative, funded through a \$1.2 million grant by the Federation for Children with Special Needs, aims to reduce caregiver burnout and support workforce participation by providing trained caregivers who understand the unique needs of CYSHN. Massachusetts has 340,000 children and youth with special health needs, including 11,000 with medical complexity, highlighting the critical need for such services. The C2C Respite Network seeks to address the high burden of care by using a caregiver-to-caregiver model, which helps provide respite services based on shared lived experiences. The program has an internal rate of return of 306%, highlighting its effectiveness in addressing the respite crisis for caregivers. Learn more about C2C Respite Network [here](#).

## CHALLENGES

**Unmet Needs for Day Habilitation Services:** A significant challenge identified during stakeholder discussions is the unmet need for day habilitation services. Approximately 13% of individuals with disabilities are unable to return to these services due to high support needs, further exacerbating the workforce crisis and limiting care options for those with significant disabilities.

**High Turnover Rates and Vacancy Issues:** Despite some progress, turnover and vacancy rates for DSPs in Massachusetts remain a significant challenge. The 31.4% turnover rate results in increased recruitment costs, onboarding expenses, and overtime, leading to service disruptions for individuals with disabilities.

**Lack of Standardization in DSP Training:** There is no statewide standard for DSP credentialing, which has contributed to inconsistencies in service quality and has hindered workforce stability. The subcommittee is working with HSRI to identify effective strategies for implementing a standardized credentialing program.

## NEXT STEPS

**1. Enhance Stakeholder Collaboration to Address Workforce Shortages:** Facilitate regular, data-informed discussions with stakeholders from various agencies and organizations to promote collaborative, cross-sector approaches that address the workforce crisis and enhance service continuity for individuals with disabilities.

**2. Leverage Existing Workforce Data to Identify Priority Action Areas**

Review and synthesize findings from existing workforce analyses conducted by partner agencies and organizations. Use this consolidated information to pinpoint critical gaps and high-impact areas where the subcommittee can focus its efforts, such as regions with the highest vacancy rates or roles with the greatest turnover, to strategically guide workforce improvement initiatives.



**Above:** Photograph from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.



## Legislative and Budget Subcommittee

### KEY ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

**Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) Implementation:** The Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) was implemented to incentivize employers to hire individuals with disabilities. Employers are eligible for up to \$5,000 per employee in the first year and \$2,000 in subsequent years, providing significant financial incentives to promote hiring individuals with disabilities. As of early 2024, MassAbility reported that 23 applications had been received, with most interest generated by word of mouth and presentations to stakeholders. The subcommittee is actively working with MassAbility to further promote DETC awareness across the state. [Link to DETC Information and Application Process](#)

**WorkAbility Report:** The subcommittee has been closely reviewing the WorkAbility Report, which serves as a roadmap for disability-focused initiatives. Legislative priorities emerging from the report include setting new disability hiring goals in state contracting, removing physical and technical barriers to employment, and creating disability hiring tax incentives. [Link to WorkAbility Report](#)

**Collaboration with the Arc of Massachusetts:** In April 2024, Maura Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer of The Arc of Massachusetts, presented on the ongoing workforce crisis and legislative advocacy efforts. The Arc emphasized the importance of citizen empowerment in advocacy and shared their FY'25 budget "ASK," including \$134 million in additional funding for the Department of Developmental Services and a 22% increase in Family Support. The subcommittee is working closely with The Arc to align budgetary priorities and amplify the needs of the disability community. [Link to The Arc's Advocacy Priorities](#)

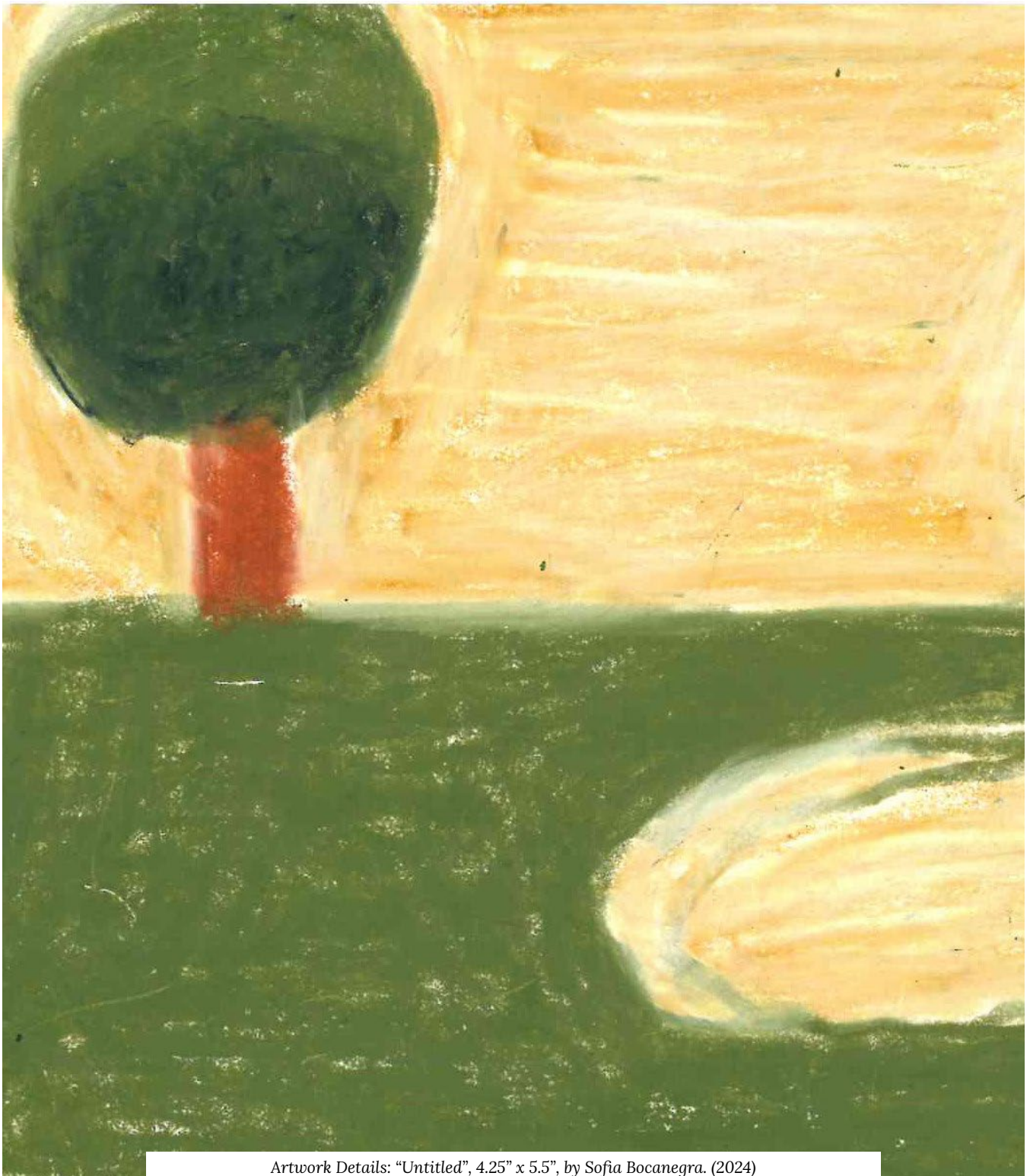
### NEXT STEPS

1. This subcommittee will be renamed and assigned new responsibilities in 2025.



*Above: Photograph from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.*

# V. Inaugural National Disability Employment Awareness Month Signature Event



Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Sofia Bocanegra. (2024)





**Above:** Photographs from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.

The Commission held its first **National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM)** celebration on October 5, 2023, drawing close to **200** diverse attendees to the Massachusetts State House. This event aligned with the Commission’s priorities of addressing the workforce crisis by highlighting the benefits of disability-inclusive employment, as well as advocating for support within the workforce serving people with disabilities.

The event celebrated employees with disabilities, inclusive employers, and the vital role of direct service providers. It also recognized legislators dedicated to advancing employment equity for individuals with disabilities. The program featured Secretary of Health and Human Services Kate Walsh as the keynote speaker, who emphasized the state’s commitment to employing people with disabilities as a solution to the workforce crisis.

Key honors included awards for Senator Karen Spilka and Representative Josh Cutler, recognized for their leadership in disability employment. Additionally, MicroTek, Inc. and Liberty Mutual were awarded for fostering inclusive workplace practices. Vanessa Stewart of WORK Inc. was celebrated as the Employment Support Champion for her exceptional support in guiding individuals with disabilities toward meaningful employment opportunities.

This successful event underscored the Commission’s commitment to disability employment and the importance of inclusive hiring practices, fostering a stronger workforce for all of Massachusetts. The Commission hosted a series of impactful events focused on advancing disability employment and addressing critical workforce challenges. Highlights included **“About Us and With Us: A Conversation with Employees with Disabilities,”** featuring disability self-advocates sharing personal and professional insights; **“Opening Doors to Employment”** a panel on creating pathways to jobs for individuals with disabilities; **“Work is Possible: SSI and SSDI Myths Debunked”** clarifying misconceptions around employment and benefits; and **“System Failure: The Workforce Crisis Impact”** which addressed the urgent needs of people with disabilities, their families, and caregivers.

These events reflected the Commission’s commitment to fostering inclusive work environments, guided by the insights of our commissioners, who are both subject matter experts and deeply attuned to the priorities and perspectives shared by the community. Through these discussions, we addressed the topics that people expressed a strong desire to learn about and engage with more fully. Recordings are accessible [here](#).



# VI. Goals for the Upcoming Year



Artwork Details: "Summer Drawing", 8.25" x 10.5", by Laurie Maguire. (2020)



## GOALS

The primary focus of the Commission has been to improve the employment landscape for individuals with disabilities, as well as for the workforce providing services to them. The Commission plans to expand on current initiatives while introducing new areas of focus, including one of the following: health, transportation, and housing as potential areas of interest, which will be voted on during the Commission's December quarterly meeting.





## VII. Appendix



Artwork Details: "Untitled", 4.25" x 5.5", by Madison Wang. (2023)



## References and Links

- 1. Department of Economic Research (DER) Reports:** Access the full [Department of Economic Research \(DER\) reports](#), which provide data-driven insights into employment for people with disabilities.
- 2. WorkAbility Report:** Access the [WorkAbility Report](#) here.
- 3. The Arc of Massachusetts Advocacy Priorities:** Details on the [Arc's FY25 budget priorities and advocacy work](#).
- 4. National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) Event Recordings:** [Accessible recordings](#) of impactful events from the NDEAM celebration.
- 5. Harvard Graduate School of Education Capstone Collaboration:** Access [the full report here](#) on transition and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.
- 6. Massachusetts Supplier Diversity Office (SDO) Pilot Program:** Learn more about the [Massachusetts Supplier Diversity Office pilot program](#) for disability-owned businesses.
- 7. National Disability Employment Awareness Month Video and Resource Guide:** Watch the [NDEAM celebration video featuring inclusive practices and access the resource guide](#).
- 8. Caregiver to Caregiver (C2C) Respite Network:** Details on the [C2C Respite Network](#), a peer-to-peer respite program supporting caregivers.
- 9. Direct Support Professional (DSP) Workforce Survey:** Learn more about the findings of the DSP Workforce Survey conducted in partnership with the Human Services Research Institute: [DSP Workforce Survey](#) and [What can be done](#) to meet the challenge.
- 10. Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC):** Information and application process for the [Disability Employment Tax Credit](#).



*Above: Photograph from the 2023 National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebration.*



# The Massachusetts Permanent Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities



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