



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT *of*
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY



Implementation of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program

www.FloridaUniqueAbilities.org

Introduction

The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program was established as a way to recognize businesses or organizations that employ individuals who have a disability, that contribute to local or national disability organizations, or that contribute to the establishment of a program that advances the independence of individuals who have a disability.

The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program was successfully launched on October 26, 2016. Although the program has only been operational about two months and was implemented during a busy holiday season for most businesses, more than 75 entities already have been designated as Florida Unique Abilities Partners to date. These entities include state agencies, local workforce boards, private businesses and advocacy organizations.

DEO is pleased with the interest shown in the program and plans to work diligently to further promote it by continuing efforts to ensure statewide awareness. The real success, however, is increased employment opportunities and support to individuals with unique abilities, resulting in a pathway to economic independence and ultimately a better quality of life.

Background

Section 413.801, Florida Statutes, created the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program. The law, passed in 2016 (Chapter 2016-3, F.A.C.), requires DEO to establish the program and provide a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by January 1, 2017, on the status of its implementation, including the adoption of rules, development of the logo and development of application procedures.

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The law requires the Department of Economic Opportunity to:

1. Consult with specified agency partners in the creation of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program and development of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner logo.
2. Adopt procedures for the application, nomination and designation processes for businesses to be designated as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner.
3. Ensure the specified statutory criteria is met in determining program eligibility.
4. Annually certify that businesses and organizations continue to meet the criteria for designation as a Unique Abilities Partner.
5. Adopt guidelines and requirements for the use of the logo.
6. Develop and maintain a website for the program.
7. Provide the Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation (VISIT FLORIDA) with a current list of all businesses that are designated as Florida Unique Abilities Partners, on a quarterly basis.
8. Coordinate with CareerSource Florida to identify in the Employ Florida Marketplace system employment opportunities posted by those business entities listed that have a Florida Unique Abilities Partner designation.
9. Adopt rules to administer the program.
10. Report on the program annually in the department's annual report.

Definition of Unique Abilities

For purposes of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program, the law defines individuals who have a disability as “persons who have a physical or intellectual impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, persons who have a history or record of such an impairment, or persons who are perceived by others as having such an impairment.”

Criteria for Designation as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner

The law provides that businesses or organizations can be designated as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner if they meet at least one of the following criteria:

1. Employment of at least one individual with a disability. Such employees must be residents of Florida and must have been employed by the business for at least nine months before the business applies for a Florida Unique Abilities Partner designation.
2. Contributed to local and/or national disability organizations or made contributions in support of individuals who have a disability. Such contributions may be financial or in-kind, including employee volunteer hours. Contributions must be documented by providing copies of written receipts or letters of acknowledgement from recipients, or donees. A business entity with 100 or fewer employees must make a financial or in-kind contribution of at least \$1,000 and a business entity with more than 100 employees must make a financial or in-kind contribution of at least \$5,000.
3. Established or contributed to the establishment of a program that contributes to the independence of individuals who have a disability. Contributions must be documented by providing copies of written receipts, a summary of the program, program materials, or letters of acknowledgement from program participants or volunteers. A business entity with 100 or fewer employees must make a financial or in-kind contribution of at least \$1,000 in the program and a business entity with more than 100 employees must make a financial or in-kind contribution of at least \$5,000.

Coordination with Agency Partners

DEO consulted with the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Education’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Division of Blind Services, as well as CareerSource Florida, in creating the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program. Both in-person meetings and teleconference calls were held to garner discussions and gain critical input in the development of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program and logo.

Program and Website Development

DEO created a website (www.FloridaUniqueAbilities.org) to highlight the Florida Unique Abilities Partner program. The website includes information on program guidelines (including logo guidelines), resources, news and events, application and nomination forms and process, and a list of entities approved as unique abilities partners. This partner list is updated daily and includes the business name, website (hyperlink), and the county location identified by the business on its application. Hard copy application and nomination forms are also available in English, Spanish and Creole and can be mailed by the U.S. postal service or scanned and emailed to DEO.

Once application and nomination forms are received, staff review the forms to determine if the business meets the required statutory criteria. Those meeting the criteria are approved as designated Florida Unique Abilities Partners. Currently, DEO reviews and processes the application and nomination forms and responds to any questions or emails within a 24-hour period during the normal business week. Newly approved partners receive a letter from Executive Director Cissy Proctor, copies of the program and logo guidelines, logo template to be used on company letterhead or in marketing materials, and window clings of the logo that can be displayed in storefronts or office windows.

DEO established a designated toll-free telephone line and email address for the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program so businesses and organizations that want to apply, know more about the program, or have specific questions can easily and quickly reach program staff.

The annual certification process has not been implemented since the program is in its first few months of implementation. During mid-year 2017, an annual certification and email reminder process will be added to the website to make this process easier for Florida Unique Abilities Partners to recertify for 2018.

Outcome data is being captured and available upon request. Additionally, program outcomes will be reported as required in the department's annual report.

Florida Unique Abilities Partner Benefits

By accepting designation as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner, businesses and organizations receive the following:

- Name recognition on the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program website.
- Special designation in the Employ Florida Marketplace (if currently listed).
- Florida Unique Abilities Partner logo for commercial use.
- Window cling (display) of the logo.
- By accepting designation as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner, the business name will also be provided to VISIT FLORIDA for consideration in the development of marketing campaigns.

The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program was also designed to raise awareness about the economic and social benefits of employing individuals with unique abilities. These benefits are highlighted in the business toolkit (available on the website) and through other marketing and outreach forums.

Florida Unique Abilities Partners are not only strengthening the state's economy and workforce by giving a talented but untapped group of Floridians who want to work, more opportunities to do so, but partners also send a strong message to patrons and their local communities.

- *Demonstration of socially responsible community leadership:* Participating partners send a strong message of social responsibility to their communities and to current and prospective customers.
- *Connect with and support like-minded businesses:* Designated businesses are encouraged to connect with other like-minded companies and organizations and to share best practices to businesses that do not employ Floridians with unique abilities. Additionally, participation in the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program opens the door for businesses to network and partner with fellow designees, fostering new business opportunities and collaborations.

- *Employing a Diverse Workforce:* The unique skill sets that individuals with unique abilities bring to a company often present the company with a strategic advantage. Businesses employing such a diverse workforce have reported higher levels of productivity and better access to new markets.

Program Awareness and Statewide Outreach

DEO has initiated a statewide awareness and outreach program to promote and encourage businesses and organizations around the state to apply for designation as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner.

CareerSource Florida and DEO engaged the services of a communications firm to assist in developing a strategic roadmap and communications plan for the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program.

Initially, the firm held three focus groups across the state to gather input from representatives of key target audiences (businesses, advocacy organizations, state agencies and others) about the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program, including messaging, tagline and logo. This strategy was adopted to ensure the program would be meaningful to businesses and organizations and that such entities would see a value in participating and becoming a Florida Unique Abilities Partner.

The firm has developed marketing and outreach materials, including a business tool kit, assisted in key messaging, reviewed website and content information, and helped coordinate the launch of the program. Additionally, a social media strategy was implemented to reach businesses and organizations to further publicize the program. DEO has conducted its own outreach to businesses and organizations as well.

DEO, working with CareerSource Florida and the communications firm, will continue to raise program awareness through various marketing and outreach forums. It is anticipated that as more businesses and organizations become partners, word will spread and other entities will seek the Florida Unique Abilities Partner designation.

Statewide Program Launch

On October 26, 2016, Senate President Andy Gardiner and Executive Director Cissy Proctor, along with Florida businesses and advocates, announced the statewide launch of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program in Orlando, Florida. Partners at the launch in support of the program included Walgreens, Northrop Grumman, AT&T, SeaWorld, the Florida Chamber, and the Board of Governors for the State University System of Florida.

Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation (VISIT FLORIDA)

The law requires DEO to provide VISIT FLORIDA with a current list of all businesses that are designated as Florida Unique Abilities Partners on a quarterly basis. DEO staff are in contact with VISIT FLORIDA staff and are in the process of coordinating the technical requirements for timely file exchange of businesses designated as Florida Unique Abilities Partners.

Rulemaking

As required by law, DEO adopted Rule 4.001 to implement the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program.