

## + + + *Community Policy Forums*

### Highlights from Chandler, Arizona

#### The Policy Forums:

Workplace Flexibility 2010 – a policy initiative based at Georgetown Law – is working to spur meaningful dialogue toward the creation of workplace flexibility policies that meet both employee and employer needs. As part of that process, Workplace Flexibility 2010 is hosting a series of six policy forums across the country to hear directly from local community and business leaders about the changing needs of their workforce – and to bring their perspectives and insights back to the national policy debate on workplace flexibility.

#### Chandler, Arizona:

Workplace Flexibility 2010's first community policy forum was held in December 2007 in Chandler, Arizona – in partnership with the Chandler Chamber of Commerce, the East Valley Chamber of Commerce Alliance, and Governor Janet Napolitano's Office.

Arizona is one of the fastest growing states in the country – and the needs of its workforce are changing dramatically. Older workers now represent a significant part of Arizona's workforce, and labor shortages are anticipated as they reach retirement. At the same time, Arizona is making tremendous investments in business innovation and technology – and attempting to draw in more highly skilled workers pursuing opportunity in new industries.

Chandler businesses are already leading the way in using workplace flexibility as a strategy for attracting and retaining the best workers and increasing their competitive advantage. For several years, the Chandler Chamber of Commerce has partnered with When Work Works – a project of the Families and Work Institute – in presenting area employers with the Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. This year, twelve Chandler employers will receive the award for implementing some of the most innovative flexible work practices and policies in the nation.

For that reason, Workplace Flexibility 2010 and the Chandler Chamber decided to combine this policy forum with the launch of the Sloan Awards, so that the event reflected one overarching purpose: exploring **how voluntary employer practices can work together with thoughtful public policy to create comprehensive flexibility solutions that will help both businesses and employees succeed.** Speakers at this combined event included Boyd Dunn, the mayor of Chandler; John Prescott, the Chairman of the Chandler Chamber of Commerce; Robert J. Blaney, Arizona District Director of the U.S. Small Business Administration; and Fred Alderson, Arizona Site IT Manager for the Intel Corporation. The audience represented an extremely diverse range of business and community groups from the Chandler and Phoenix area, including the Chandler Regional Hospital, a small furniture design firm, a nonprofit health and wellness institute, and the local Area Agency on Aging.

## Addressing the Need for Flexibility – Business Practices and Public Policy

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During the policy forum, Mick Smyer, Co-Director of the Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, presented some of the most recent data reflecting the dramatic demographic changes impacting our workplaces – particularly the rapid aging of our workforce. Workplace Flexibility 2010 Co-Director Chai Feldblum then presented participants with an overview of how those demographic shifts have made workplace flexibility an urgent public policy issue – and that comprehensive federal policy must take into account the needs of both employees and employers. Becky Jackson, President of the Chandler Chamber, and Melanie Starns, Director of the Governor's Office on Aging, responded from a local business and government perspective – both emphasizing the need to educate and share best practices in order to make workplace flexibility a standard in Arizona's workplaces.

The forum's participants were then asked to respond to a series of questions posed by Workplace Flexibility 2010:

- **What struck them or surprised them most about the data and information presented?**
- **How have they experienced the need for flexibility – both within their workplace and in their families or communities?**
- **How could local, state or federal government entities help increase access to workplace flexibility – in a manner that worked for both employees and employers?**

Participants split into small groups for discussion, and the following themes emerged from those conversations:

- Participants were struck that such a high percentage of employees are nearing or reaching retirement, and that moderate or severe labor shortages were expected in some crucial industries;
- Participants also commented that it is clear there is a need for flexibility throughout the lifespan, and that "culture change" is needed – through education for both employees and employers – to make it a standard of workplace practices;
- Some participants were also surprised that many employers saw a clear, positive connection between business effectiveness and increase workplace flexibility – and stated that other employers who typically focus on short-term profit margins should look closely at the long-term benefits associated with flexibility.

In terms of how participants had experienced the need for flexibility, they shared the following points:

- One company had dealt with several employees who needed extended time off for long-standing health and medical reasons – and wondered how workplace flexibility could be tied to health promotion activities in order to support employee wellbeing.
- Another business had struggled with how to approach compensation issues for employees who needed extended time off for chronic health conditions or to care for family members.
- Some participants stated that managers are often concerned that increased workplace flexibility might decrease productivity – and said they needed evidence-based best practices in order to feel confident about establishing more accessible flexibility policies.

Participants also shared their thoughts on how public policy might support increased workplace flexibility. The following were common ideas shared by a number of participants:

- Government must make workplace flexibility successful within the federal workforce, so that it can serve as a model for other employers.
- Government could support businesses by connecting them to other "mentor" companies and managers already using workplace flexibility successfully to ensure the best possible technical assistance.
- Government could provide businesses with incentives (for instance, tax credits or matching programs) in order to support the development of effective workplace flexibility solutions.