

Increasing Access and Equity Within the Workforce Development System



This brief highlights promising employment practices, strategies, and resources for workforce staff and their partners to support people with disabilities from all communities, including those from historically marginalized communities.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act provides opportunities for supporting job seekers, including those with disabilities. This increases the responsibility of workforce boards and American Job Centers to be physically and programmatically accessible and to offer necessary accommodations.

Today, “DEIA” is an acronym for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, which was the goal of the U.S. Department of Labor’s disability employment initiatives and which helped lay this groundwork for increasing access and equity within the workforce development system.

MEANINGFUL AND EFFECTIVE PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

As workforce development partners commit to equitable practices to increase access to programs, have you considered what people with disabilities need to meaningfully participate and achieve their career goals?

Individuals with disabilities continue to be disproportionately underemployed and living in poverty, and they experience lower rates of employment and higher rates of unemployment than individuals without disabilities. In 2020, 17.9 percent of individuals with disabilities were employed compared to 61.8 percent of individuals without disabilities, and the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities was 12.6 percent compared to 7.9 percent for individuals without disabilities. Further, people of color with disabilities face even greater unemployment than their white counterparts. Unemployment rates for individuals with disabilities were higher among Hispanics (16.8 percent), Blacks (16.3 percent), and Asians (15.7 percent) than among whites (11.6 percent).¹

After the passage of the Workforce Investment Act in 1998 and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) directed funds and resources to improve workforce services for job seekers, including job seekers with disabilities.² DOL provided funding to American Job Center services to promote physical and programmatic accessibility as well as meaningful and effective participation of job seekers in the workforce development system. Past disability employment initiatives have brought new levels of understanding, which support activities to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

The Disability Employment Technical Assistance Project has incorporated effective strategies from DOL-funded initiatives into national resources to further support organizational learning on ways to build the capacity of the workforce system to serve people with disabilities.

- The [Disability and Employment eLearning Taskforce developed eLearning modules](#) to support the professional development of front line staff to provide a seamless customer experience for individuals with disabilities and businesses. Modules cover serving individuals with disabilities, working across partners, and providing inclusive business services. Each module includes strategies, tips, state examples, and case scenarios.
- The [Workforce Innovation Cohort on Disability and Employment developed innovative disability and employment service delivery tools and resources](#) to address barriers and provide solutions to effective service delivery within American Job Centers. The tools are customizable and can be a good starting point to address challenges and improve customer service.

Strategies and Resources to Improve Access

Disability employment strategies, dedicated staff experts, and incorporation of workforce Employment Networks have resulted in an increased likelihood of employment and participation in the economic mainstream for people with disabilities.

DOL-funded initiatives have mapped disability and employment-related resources in local areas across systems and entities, identifying ways these resources can be blended and braided at the system and customer levels. This has improved access to needed services, career pathways programs, and employment outcomes for job seekers with disabilities.

Strategic approaches include:

- Expanding partnership coordination and collaboration
- Braiding funds and leveraging resources to contribute to education, training, and/or employment goals and outcomes
- Promoting access to the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Ticket to Work program and creating Workforce Employment Networks
- Facilitating return to work and employment retention through asset-development activities
- Providing staffing expertise on disability-related issues
- Supporting programmatic and physical accessibility at American Job Centers with partners
- Sharing customized employment strategies to address individualized employment needs



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Curated Promising Practices

We have curated the following disability employment practices from the field. They represent strategies that local and state workforce systems can use to better serve people with disabilities.

- **Strategic approaches to sharing customers, resources, and outcomes.** The [Integrated Resource Team \(IRT\) model](#) at American Job Centers brings together representatives from different agencies and service systems (both general workforce and disability-specific) to serve participants collaboratively. IRTs coordinate services and leverage funding to meet the employment needs of individual job seekers with disabilities.
- **Promotion of career pathways for individuals with disabilities.** Using an integrated resource team model to improve career outcomes for youth with disabilities, New York developed [Your Dream, Your Team](#). This online statewide capacity-building resource serves multiple audiences, including youth with disabilities pursuing employment and the people and organizations who support them.
- **Cross-agency state task forces.** At the systems level, states have created cross-agency task forces to leverage funding and coordinate services. Iowa's state workforce development board codified a [Disability Access Standing Committee](#) and established local committees that address issues related to providing workforce services to individuals with disabilities. Virginia leadership charged with developing and implementing the state's WIOA Combined State Plan formed a cross-system [Accessibility Taskforce](#) to address equal opportunity and access.
- **Disability Employment Accelerator (DEA).** In California, the governor uses WIOA discretionary funds to promote the use of regional industry-sector strategies as the framework to help unemployed and underemployed people with disabilities obtain and retain competitive integrated employment. [DEA grants](#) help local areas design, develop, and implement projects that accelerate employment and re-employment strategies.
- **State commitment to expand disability resource coordination.** In New York, the governor is using federal workforce development funding [to expand the network of disability resource coordinators to all 33 local workforce development areas](#) and to better serve individuals with disabilities in New York American Job Centers.
- **Increased knowledge around programmatic accessibility.** To ensure programmatic access in American Job Centers and partner agencies, Colorado's Department of Labor and Employment worked with WIOA partners to create [Programmatic Accessibility for Colorado WIOA Partners](#). This self-paced, online course helps educate staff on WIOA's Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity requirements (Section 188) and offers resources for implementation. The course contains state-specific information as well as information that is applicable to any state and/or workforce area.
- **Connecting people with disabilities to employment opportunities.** The Idaho Department of Labor integrated an ["Able to Work"](#) dedicated landing page into the state website for job seekers and employers to provide links to tools, resources, and information that help workforce staff and partners connect people with disabilities to employment opportunities.
- **Workforce Employment Network tools and resources.** DOL created a dedicated web page on WorkforceGPS that includes technical assistance resources to support workforce entities in learning more about the process to become and operate an Employment Network. This website aims to expand the capacity of the public workforce system under the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Ticket to Work program to improve the coordination of services to customers who also receive SSA disability benefits.
- **Support for youth in transition.** [Incorporating the Guideposts for Success in Minnesota's Personal Learning Plan Process](#), a guide for youth workforce development professionals, shows how to integrate disability employment core strategies—career pathways, integrated resource teams, and the Guideposts framework for youth transition to adulthood—with career planning activities for both in-school and out-of-school youth.
- **Best practices highlights.** [Best Practices Highlights](#) provides mini summary briefs to demonstrate promising practices impacting the workforce system. Best Practice Highlights aims to increase access and participation for people with disabilities in career pathways and workforce services at all levels.

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, February 26). [Persons with a disability: Labor force characteristics – 2020](#) [Press release]. U.S. Department of Labor.

² From 2001 to 2020, the DOL's Employment and Training Administration and Office of Disability Employment Policy jointly funded three disability employment initiatives (Work Incentive Grants, the Disability Program Navigator Initiative, and the Disability Employment Initiative) to support and promote a universally designed workforce development system that can meet the needs of all job seekers, including those with disabilities.