With the national unemployment rate at 4.1 percent, the booming economy will likely mark 2018 as the eighth straight year of positive job growth. Despite this record-breaking streak, however, unemployment among people with disabilities remains around 10 percent.

For a person with a disability, a job means much more than a paycheck. It means independence, self-confidence and security. For employers, hiring people with disabilities can provide them with loyal employees who often improve productivity and staff morale. For governments at all levels, increasing employment levels among this population can result in increased economic productivity and reduced health care and human services budget expenditures. But employment must be gainful, as people with disabilities often have higher living expenses than those without disabilities.

In an effort to reduce the unemployment rate for people with disabilities, many businesses, governments, nonprofits and others are looking to include this population in work-based learning programs. These supervised programs link knowledge gained at the worksite with a planned program of study sponsored by an educational or training organization. Work-based learning provides individuals with on-the-job training along with a salary or course credit and critical work experience that makes them more attractive to prospective employers. This career development strategy comes in many forms, including apprenticeships, internships, service learning, job shadowing, credit for prior learning and mentorship programs. These opportunities also provide people with disabilities valuable experience in communicating with an employer about their disability and asking for necessary accommodations.

**State Action**

NCSL and the Council of State Governments published *Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities*. The report, in part, outlines a number of state policy options to improve access to work-based learning programs for people with disabilities.
States have supported work-based learning programs in many ways. Kentucky published a guide for schools to use when implementing work-based initiatives, South Carolina’s career readiness program emphasizes multiple forms of work-based learning, and Wisconsin has a youth apprenticeship program. Since students with disabilities often need help developing communication and critical thinking skills, as well as preparing for the social environment of the workplace, some states use Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). These programs often include step-by-step career pathways to meet these needs. Currently, 44 states and the District of Columbia require or strongly encourage schools to implement Individualized Learning Plans to facilitate college and career readiness among youth with and without disabilities. The Colorado Department of Education developed a detailed transition toolkit to guide school personnel and families through the process of transitioning students with disabilities from high school into college and a career. The toolkit not only emphasizes the importance of hands-on occupational learning, but also the extensive preparation needed to help students with disabilities thrive in a work environment.

In addition, working closely with the business community better aligns students’ hands-on work experience with the classroom instruction intended to complement that experience. States can provide guidance to high schools and postsecondary institutions about how to engage the local business community. The Minnesota Department of Education published A Reference Guide to Minnesota Work-Based Learning Programs that outlines how to establish advisory committees that oversee work-based learning programs. The guide recommends that committee members represent stakeholders from the private and public sectors as well as parents and students.

State governments, as one of the largest employers in each state, can also serve as a model employer by offering their own work-based learning programs inclusive of youth with disabilities. The Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services operates the QUEST internship program, matching people with disabilities with state agencies for internships and mentoring services. Upon completing the internship, participants receive a certification for civil service employment, placing them on a list of eligible applicants that state agency managers use to fill full-time positions.

**Federal Action**

In 2014, Congress enacted the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which emphasizes inclusive work-based learning as an integral strategy for developing a 21st-century workforce. Title IV of WIOA updates Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, providing billions of dollars to support state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs, including a requirement that 15 percent of VR funds support services to prepare youth for post-secondary education and employment. State VR programs provide individualized workforce development services to people with disabilities, who often create rehabilitation plans outlining a structured pathway to employment. VR agencies can partner with the private sector to find work-based learning opportunities that align with the participant’s career goals. VR services have evolved over time as research has refined what we know about developing career skills and as society has embraced more inclusive attitudes toward people with disabilities. State VR agencies serve a critical role in developing career skills for people with disabilities as they represent an individualized interaction between the government and job-seekers.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) administers the Registered Apprenticeship system. Employers offering apprenticeships can register them with DOL as long as they meet the federal requirements, including offering hands-on experience correlated with ongoing classroom instruction. People who complete a registered apprenticeship often obtain a portable professional credential to help them secure long-term employment. DOL’s Office of Disability Employment Policy works with the business community to promote registered apprenticeships that include people with disabilities.

The Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities (WRP) is a recruitment and referral program that connects federal, state and private-sector employers nationwide with qualified job candidates for temporary or permanent positions in a variety of fields. Applicants are postsecondary students and recent graduates with disabilities who are eager to prove their abilities in the workforce. Through the WRP, employers have access to prescreened job candidates from across the nation, the ability to source candidates who are veterans, and flexibility in hiring for summer internships or permanent positions. WRP is managed by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and the U.S. Department of Defense’s Office of Diversity Management & Equal Opportunity (ODMEO).

**Did You Know?**

- Possessing the skills needed to successfully perform higher-paying jobs in the 21st century remains a significant barrier to employment for people with disabilities.
- The labor participation rate for people with disabilities is 20 percent, compared to 68 percent for those without a disability.
- The U.S. Army offers a summer apprenticeship program for high school students from groups historically under-represented in science, technology, engineering and math subjects, including students with disabilities.

**Additional Resources**

- NCSL report, *Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities*
- Federal Office of Disability Employment Policy
- Federal Partners in Transition

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