



States Help People with Disabilities Get to Work

BY SAIGE DRAEGER

As people with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in the workforce, some state lawmakers are working to make sure they enjoy the same employment opportunities as everyone else. State legislatures enacted 44 laws relating to workforce development in 2018 to help people with disabilities access and retain meaningful employment. They expanded access to transportation, adopted initiatives to employ more people with disabilities, and increased incentives for private-sector hiring.

For years, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has remained higher than the rate for those without disabilities. Roughly 9.2 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed, compared to 4.2 percent of those with no disability. People

with disabilities also work part time at higher rates than those without a disability, at 32 percent and 17 percent, respectively. One of the larger employment disparities for people with disabilities exists in the labor force participation rate: 8 in 10 people with disabilities are neither employed nor looking for work. For workers without a disability, that figure drops to 3 in 10.

To study the issue, NCSL and the Council of State Governments (CSG) convened a yearlong task force in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy's (ODEP) [State Exchange on Employment and Disability](#). The group published a report, "[Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities](#)," in December 2016. Task force members, including state policymakers, legislative personnel and state

Did You Know?

- One in 5 Americans lives with a disability.
- People with disabilities are three times more likely to depend on public transportation to get to work than those without a disability.
- Unemployment rates for people with disabilities are higher across all education levels compared to those without a disability.

executive branch officials, examined barriers to employment for people with disabilities. They identified 13 policy options under the following five general categories:

■ **Laying the groundwork** considers policy options that communicate the state commitment to supporting employment access and opportunities for people with disabilities. This includes making the state a model employer, building capacity for employment in the private sector, increasing awareness about disability, and coordinating efforts among agencies.

■ **Preparing for work** considers policies that provide education and vocational training to youth and young adults with disabilities, including inclusive career planning, work-based learning and family engagement.

■ **Getting to work and accessing opportunities** considers policy options ensuring that physical spaces, services and technologies provide equal access to work opportunities, including accessible information and communication technology, and employment-related transportation.

■ **Staying at work** considers policies that provide employers with tools to retain and advance workers when injury, illness or a change in disability status occurs.

■ **Supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship** considers policies that increase opportunities for new and existing business owners with disabilities through entrepreneurship training and business incentives and supports.

State Action

Despite an overall drop in enacted legislation from 2017, lawmakers across the country continued to affirm their support for employing people with disabilities. Nine states passed legislation addressing getting to work and accessing opportunities in 2018. Transportation remained a key legislative priority for lawmakers, with seven states passing legislation to increase access to transit—a barrier people with disabilities cite as one of the most significant to attaining employment. Connecticut's [HB 5245](#) established a task force to study the state's transportation system and identify more efficient options for people with disabilities, along with veterans and senior citizens. Missouri's [HB 2004](#) appropriated money to improve the state's public transportation system beyond the ADA's federal requirements.

Lawmakers also focused on creating a foundation for employing people with disabilities by increasing coordination among state agencies—amplifying their role as a model employer—and offering incentives to private-sector businesses that employ

people with disabilities. Six states—Colorado, Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Wisconsin—adopted measures with “employment first” initiatives. The initiatives seek to prioritize competitive integrated employment within federally funded agencies and programs.

Other efforts include Rhode Island's [HB 7200](#), which provided funding for a dedicated resource center for people with disabilities. Tennessee's [SB 1777](#) and [HB 1750](#) secured long-term funding for programs serving people with disabilities, and Washington's [SB 6032](#) commissioned a study of state employment services for people with developmental disabilities.

Federal Action

Inclusive apprenticeships offer one strategy for increasing workforce participation for people with disabilities. These programs not only provide employment opportunities, they also increase access to valuable career training. President Donald Trump issued an executive order in June 2017 calling for the expansion of apprenticeships by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The order allows registered apprenticeship partners and intermediaries of the state and federal departments of labor to receive recruitment and operational assistance. DOL awarded \$4 million to Los Angeles County's Youth Policy Institute for its [LA Promise Zone](#) project, which serves people with disabilities who are at least 17, out of high school and unemployed, dislocated or underemployed. The program places participants in the rapidly growing information technology field with steady, well-paying jobs. DOL lays out 26 recommendations in [The Taskforce on Apprenticeship Expansion Final Report](#) to increase and encourage apprenticeships across industries.

Work at the federal level also continues to improve employment retention for people with disabilities. The [RETAIN Demonstration Projects](#)—a collaborative federal effort led by ODEP—offered funding to states seeking to improve stay-at-work and return-to-work outcomes for employees with both occupational and non-occupational injuries and illnesses. Participating states can use the funds to support retraining and rehabilitation, job modifications and accommodations, and increased communication among workers, employers and health care providers. The five-year RETAIN initiative will release funding in two phases, with the first focusing on small pilot demonstrations and the second on project implementation. Eight state employment agencies received a total of roughly \$19 million during Phase 1. At the end of Phase 1, certain awardees may be given up to \$19,750,000 each to fully implement their projects.

Additional Resources

- [NCSL Disability Employment Database](#)
- [Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities](#)
- [Labor Force Characteristics of People with a Disability](#)

NCSL Contacts

[Saige Draeger](#)
303-856-1512

[Josh Cunningham](#)
303-856-1354