

Understanding Workforce Customers with Disabilities: Why It Matters



National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult

Your customer base is diverse—and getting more so—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. What you may not be aware of is that a growing percentage of customers may also be persons with disabilities.

More and more, individuals with disabilities are recognizing that work fulfills the need to be productive and economically self-sufficient. Work promotes independence, enhances self-esteem, and contributes productively to the community. People with disabilities are valuable members of the workforce. In order to increase the pool of skilled workers that the business community needs, we need to increase the labor market participation rates of *all* our workforce customers—especially those with disabilities. To give you a sense of what an important part of the economy they are, individuals with disabilities represent \$220 billion in buying power, according to the National Organization on Disability (2004).

As more individuals with disabilities move into employment, they are more likely to become workforce system customers. Don't be fooled by the low numbers of people served by your One-Stops who report a disability. These self-identified figures *do not reflect the true composition* of your potential customer base. Many individuals may not indicate that they have a disability because they are concerned about discrimination or stigma, or they feel that the information is not relevant to their job search. Or they may be unaware that they have a disability, and do not relate their problems in work and education to these unidentified or unrecognized disabilities. In short, the disparity between official rates and responses when the information is not linked to applications suggests that One-Stops are seeing a significantly greater number of individuals with disabilities than customers report.

A study of a New Jersey One-Stop found that when customers were asked to report the presence of a disability anonymously, *this self-reported rate was 21%*—nearly four times higher than WIA data show (Gervey & Ni, 2004). The U.S. Census reports that 18.6% of people in the U.S. 16 to 64 years of age indicate that they have a disability (*Census 2000 Summary File #3, March 2003, U.S. Census Bureau*).

For individuals receiving public assistance such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or Medicare, those numbers are even higher. When the TANF population was surveyed, *44% reported one or more physical or mental impairments*. The ability of the TANF agency to address the disability and other complicating factors contributed to an individual's ability to move into employment (*GAO Report 02-37, 2001*).

When thinking about the population served in your One-Stop, you need to consider the national picture—but your community demographics will also help you understand your customer base. Here are some key statistics your board should know:

Employment rate

People with disabilities are less likely to be employed than their nondisabled peers, and so are potentially more likely to seek One-Stop services. In 2000, 79% of working-age men without a disability were employed, compared to *60% of those who indicated a disability*. Women without disabilities had a 67.3% employment rate compared to a rate of 51.4% for women with disabilities (*Census 2000 Summary File #3, March 2003, U.S. Census Bureau*).

Educational status

Graduation rates and participation in post-secondary education have increased for youth with disabilities, but they still lag behind their nondisabled peers. Thirty percent of out-of-school youth with disabilities left high school without finishing. Nineteen percent of youth with disabilities were attending a post-secondary school, compared to 40% of their peers in the general population (*National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, 2005*).

Older workers

The likelihood of experiencing a disability increases with age. Individuals aged 18-44 have a relatively low rate of 7.7%. However, the rate is 18% among people aged 45-64, **32.6% among those aged 65-74, and 50.9% among those aged 75-84** (Disability Statistics Center, 2004). This will be a growing issue as baby boomers begin to turn 60 and continue in the workforce for longer periods of time (*Census 2000 Summary File #3, March 2003, U.S. Census Bureau*).

Region of the country

Disability rates also vary by region. Almost two out of every five people with disabilities live in the South, while about one in five lives in each of the other three U.S. regions. (Disability rate by region: 20.9% in the South, 19.2% Northeast, 18.7% West, 17.7% Midwest.) Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia have the highest overall disability rates; Alaska, Utah, and Minnesota have the lowest (*Census 2000 Summary File #3, March 2003, U.S. Census Bureau*).

Racial diversity

Disability rates vary among racial and ethnic groups. For individuals 16-64 years of age, **16.2%** of individuals who identify themselves as White, Non-Hispanic report a disability. This is compared to **16.9%** of Asians, **24%** Hispanic (any race), **26.4%** Black or African-American, and **27%** American Indian or Alaskan native (*Census 2000 Summary File #3, March 2003, U.S. Census Bureau*).

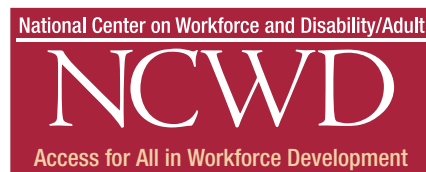
Since workforce staff will never be able to determine all the variables that may contribute to barriers for an individual, they should develop strategies that are effective for all customers. One-Stop staff need to be prepared to serve individuals with a variety of ability and needs, whether or not they report a disability or other life complications. Services and strategies need to be developed that will effectively benefit individuals with barriers to employment, no matter what barrier. Using strategies that apply to your entire customer base—rather than focusing specifically on disability status or other barriers to employment—will be more effective in achieving good employment outcomes.

As these numbers indicate, many people you serve experience disabilities or other barriers. And what they want from the workforce system is... **employment**.

For assistance addressing this important issue, please contact

National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult
Institute for Community Inclusion/UMass Boston
1-888-886-9898 (toll-free voice/TTY)

www.onestops.info



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