

CAPITOL RESEARCH

● ● ● EDUCATION & WORKFORCE POLICY

PROVIDING TRANSPORTATION, TECHNOLOGY AND OTHER EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities are a major contributing group to the workforce. However, the unemployment rate for those with disabilities is about twice as much as the unemployment rate of the general population.¹ This high rate of unemployment could be reduced by taking the proper steps to provide workers with disabilities the appropriate accommodations to allow them to be successful in the workplace. These accommodations include access to transportation, assistive workplace technologies and other employment supports.

Transportation

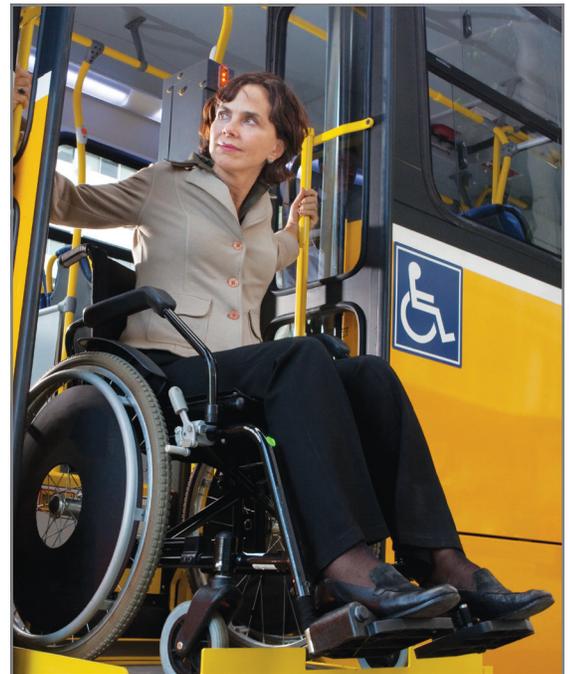
Access to transportation is one of the most important disability supports because it allows for general day-to-day mobility. In addition to providing a means of getting to work, effective transportation allows those with disabilities to live independently, reach health care appointments and access any other support services. Essentially, access to transportation provides workers with disabilities with the basic tools necessary to manage all supports available to obtain, maintain and advance their employment.

Technology

Many states and organizations have worked to develop and incorporate methods to ensure that all work functions are accessible to all employees through technology. Many states, including Georgia, Maryland, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Virginia, support the use of telework as well as the development of universal design principles that can help ensure technology is accessible to those with disabilities.

Other Employment Supports

Available employment supports are not limited to transportation and assistive technologies, however. States and employers have utilized additional support measures such as tax exemptions and other measures to reduce barriers to employment for people with disabilities. Through the Maryland Disability Employment Tax Credit, for instance, Maryland employers can claim \$900 per year against transportation or child care costs for each qualifying employee during the first two years of employment.



Utilizing Taxi and Rideshare Options

Many states and their transit authorities have partnered with taxi services in order to supplement existing transportation services for the people with disabilities as required under the Americans with Disabilities Act. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, or MBTA, is running a four-year pilot program to modernize the way transit authorities provide services to those with disabilities. This new program partners with taxi services, as well as Uber and Lyft, to provide flexible and reliable paratransit to Boston citizens with disabilities. Eligible participants are given a special debit card that can be used for taxi and ride-sharing services. The MBTA subsidizes \$13 for every \$2 that is spent on the card.² The pilot program has been well received by both customers and the MBTA because it allows for greater flexibility in scheduling rides, and will also cut costs for the transit authority. Under the MBTA's traditional paratransit program, called THE RIDE, users were forced to schedule their trips a day in advance. Now, they have the freedom to hail

rides with an almost immediate response. Additionally, the MBTA savings could reach into the millions of dollars per year. According to MBTA General Manager Brian Shortleeve, this new program is 70 percent cheaper than their existing service.³

Washington, D.C., is currently looking to follow the lead of the MBTA. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority is gearing up to unveil a similar paratransit program that will use Uber for customers who do not require the use of a wheelchair ramp. This accounts for about two-thirds of paratransit customers in the District.⁴ Before programs such as these are adopted on a grand scale, however, rideshare companies such as Uber and Lyft will have to successfully convince detractors that their background checking systems and disability support training are adequate to provide regular, quality services to paratransit customers.

Washington state has adopted a Vanpool program to help its commuters save on travel costs and reduce road and parking congestion. With roughly 3,000 vans servicing about 20,000 commuters, the state has developed the largest vanpool program in the nation. Although Vanpool was not specifically developed for paratransit, it can serve as a great resource to commuters with disabilities. Vanpool is unique because it encourages private, nonprofit organizations to provide paratransit options to their employees using tax and grant incentives.⁵

Better Accessibility in Information and Communications Technology

The information and communications technology world can often create obstacles to people with disabilities. However, much like this issue of transportation, these obstacles are navigable with the right support programs in place. Both states and private businesses have adopted measures to ensure that everyone has equal access to information.

For states, this often means ensuring that information provided on state websites meets the accessibility standards required of federal agencies by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Included in these accessibility requirements is providing alternative ways to view infographics and images on webpages. A number of states including Alabama, Arizona, California, Maine and New Hampshire have issued guiding directives to aid state agencies in meeting these requirements. Many states also have adopted provisions that require any systems upgrades to state technology acquired from outside contractors to be compliant with accessibility standards. This stipulation to doing business with a state helps expand the reach of accessibility awareness in information and communications technology, or ICT.

IBM has recognized the importance of accessibility in ICT. The company developed the Accessible Workplace Connection, which is “a single global accommodation process that helps ensure employees with disabilities have equal opportunity to advance and contribute.”⁶ The Accessible Workplace Connection application supports consistency in accommodations and allows employees and employers to work together in order to maximize productivity.

Telework Programs

As defined by the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, telework denotes “a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee’s position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work.”⁷ This concept, which is often referred to as a flexible workspace, allows employees to complete important tasks at home or anywhere that is not considered a traditional workspace. Opportunities for teleworking are revolutionary for those with disabilities because it provides many who would have a difficult time commuting to an office on a daily basis the ability to contribute fully without having to travel. Additionally, incorporating telework into the workspace is a viable way for employers to cut costs without losing valuable production.

As of January 2016, 463,000 Americans with disabilities use telework on a daily basis.⁸ Many states have adopted programs in order to promote the concept of teleworking in both the private and public sectors. For example, Nebraska and Virginia provide tax credits to public-sector employers who utilize telework in their operations.⁹ Other states, including Georgia, Maryland and Oklahoma, have adopted active programs to improve telework capabilities within state agencies.

In Oklahoma, if a state agency requests access to additional office space, it must first prove to the state’s Governmental Technology Applications Review Board that teleworking was not a viable alternative to expanding physical office space.¹⁰

Georgia has established a Work Away program with the stated purpose of “helping managers and employees understand the teleworking environment and their associated rights and responsibilities.”¹¹ The Work Away Training Manual serves as a great resource for state agencies looking to capitalize on the potential of teleworking.

Maryland has fully embraced telework in government agencies. In 2013, the state adopted an initiative that would encourage each state agency to allow 15 percent of all eligible employees to telework. Similarly to Georgia, Maryland has developed an Agency Teleworking Implementation Manual in order to aid in the achievement of this goal.

Support Programs

One way in which states have sought to support people with disabilities in their efforts to join the workforce is via career development education programs. These career training efforts often involve incorporating families into the process to ensure that graduating students with disabilities have the necessary tools they need when entering the workforce. In Arizona, the Secondary Transition Unit provides training sessions and resources for students, parents and administrators seeking to help people with disabilities transition from a school setting to the workforce.¹² Most states also offer job coaching programs through their vocational rehabilitation departments. Vocational rehabilitation counselors work with people looking to enter the workforce and provide them

with job training and help facilitate job placement in a desired field.¹³ With over 52 percent of people with disabilities employed, North Dakota has experienced great success in its vocational rehabilitation efforts. North Dakota's vocational rehabilitation department not only offers training, counseling and transportation, but also provides employers with detailed information about the economic incentives that come with hiring participants in their program.¹⁴



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