

Project Summary

The employment rate for working-age adults with disabilities has been a chronic problem in the United States. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 were two specific ways in which the federal government responded to the social, political, and economic needs of the disability community. Unfortunately, disparities related to available resources, community integration, and independent living remain. These disparities are particularly apparent in the economic arena, where people with disabilities are three times more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled persons (United States Department of Labor, 2002). Members of ethnic minority groups who are disabled face an even harsher reality when it comes to employment status and rehabilitation outcomes (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000; NCD, 1999).

A core element of the American disability policy is to assist people with disabilities in their pursuit of employment goals. Each year, federal, state, and local funds are allocated to state-governed vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs to provide vocational assessment and evaluation; academic, business, and vocational training; employment counseling; and job placement and referral. Despite these efforts, rehabilitation and employment outcomes for people with disabilities continue to be lacking. For instance, during the 1995 fiscal year, only 16% of VR clients were considered rehabilitated, defined as having completed their rehabilitation program and been suitably employed for at least 60 days. Of this group, the majority (80%) were Caucasian (Kaye, 1998).

In response to the dire employment status of the disability community, the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act was passed in 1999. In addition to providing protection of medical benefits (Medicaid and Medicare), the Act allows individuals with disabilities entering the workforce to obtain VR and employment services from their choice of participating public and private providers – also known as Employment Networks (ENs).

As disability laws and programs are enacted, a persistent challenge has been ensuring that adequate knowledge and information of these laws and programs exist among Americans with disabilities, employers, vocational personnel, rehabilitation counselors, and personnel from centers for independent living and other disability-related organizations (Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2003; Louis Harris & Associates, 1994, 1998). The mission of the proposed project is threefold. First, the project proposes to build scientific knowledge regarding the needs of people with disabilities as they pertain to the Ticket to Work (TTW) program and more generally vocational rehabilitation services. Second, there will be a concentrated emphasis on examining the diversity of needs based on racial/ethnic background and type of disability. Lastly, the proposed project aims to understand and address the capacity of ENs and offices of rehabilitation services in terms of their outreach and delivery of services.

More specifically, a needs assessment was conducted with a total of twelve focus groups. These groups included people with varying types of disabilities who were African-American, Latino, and Caucasian. In addition, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with key personnel of ENs and VR programs. Qualitative methodology guided the analyses of the focus

groups and individual interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morgan, 1997; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). These data informed the development of the Disability and Employment Questionnaire, which focuses on the needs of and barriers encountered by people with disabilities when utilizing TTW and VR programs. This survey is being used to gather information from a larger and more representative disabled group. This survey will be administered at disability job fairs and disability organizations located in the Chicagoland area. Descriptive statistics will guide the analysis of 300 completed surveys.

Once data are analyzed, a town hall meeting will be held with individuals who are disabled, ENs, VR personnel, and the project's advisory board in order to discuss viable solutions to the top issues identified through the data collection efforts. A final report that highlights the research findings and recommendations from the town hall meeting will be prepared and presented to directors of ENs, administrators of the Social Security Administration, policy makers, government officials, centers for independent living, and relevant NIDRR-funded projects.