Breaking Down Barriers: Employment and the Disability Community

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Overview of Project

Historically, the disability community has experienced high rates of unemployment. Current data estimate that between 65 to 70 percent of people with disabilities are not employed (National Organization on Disability, 2004; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005).

Numerous federal initiatives have been enacted to address the employment crisis experienced by the disability community, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), and Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (TWWIIA). Despite these initiatives, significant unemployment persists among members of this group.

The main purpose of the **Let’s Roll Project** was to examine the employment barriers experienced by people with disabilities, with an additional focus on the vocational rehabilitation (VR) system and the Ticket to Work (TTW) program. Funded in 2003 by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and the Disability Research Institute (DRI), this three-year project included three main phases.

1. **Focus Group Phase:**
   Twelve focus groups were conducted to explore the employment, VR, and TTW experiences among 74 working-age adults with disabilities. Focus group data also informed the development of a quantitative survey (The Disability and Employment Questionnaire).

2. **Survey Administration Phase:**
   The Disability and Employment Questionnaire was administered to 300 individuals with disabilities, who were employed or seeking employment.

3. **Town Hall Meeting Phase:**
   A Town Hall Meeting was organized to present findings from our focus groups and survey administration to key stakeholders (including local government officials, VR personnel, Employment Network (EN) representatives, benefits planners, legal advocates, disability advocates, service providers, and people with disabilities). Town Hall participants also worked collectively to identify potential recommendations to the key employment barriers revealed by our research efforts.
Summary of Focus Group Phase: Description of Participants

The purpose of the Focus Group Phase was to explore the employment experiences of people with disabilities in an open forum. Twelve focus groups were conducted with 74 working-age adults. As needed, focus groups were held in Spanish for non-English speaking Latinos. Focus group participants were recruited with the assistance of three collaborating community-based organizations that served the disability community. Prior to participating in the focus group, each participant completed a brief demographics survey to help provide a descriptive summary of our sample.

- Of the participants, 68% were men and 32% women.

- The ethnic/racial background of participants was
  - 61% Latino,
  - 22% African American, and
  - 18% Caucasian.

Latino participants were over-represented because the objectives of one of our grants focused on the needs of this particular group. However, analysis of themes revealed that findings were, for the most part, consistent across the three main groups.

- Participants’ types of disability included
  - 43% physical (mobility),
  - 22% sensory (11% hearing and 11% visual),
  - 19% multiple,
  - 12% cognitive/developmental,
  - 3% physical (medical/chronic illness), and
  - 1% psychiatric.

- Regarding highest level of educational attainment,
  - 18% had not obtained a high school diploma,
  - 38% had obtained high school diploma only,
  - 1% had attended technical school,
  - 19% had some college, and
  - 11% had Associates, 10% Bachelors, and 3% Masters degrees.

- The average monthly employment income of participants was $773, and 60% were SSA beneficiaries.

- Although 87% of participants had previous employment experiences, only 15% were employed at the time of the focus group.
Participants took part in a focus group that lasted approximately 90 minutes. Focus group questions explored:

1. Barriers to employment (for example, transportation, formal education)
2. Factors that have been helpful during the employment search
3. Prior experiences with the vocational rehabilitation system
4. Strengths and weaknesses of the vocational rehabilitation system
5. Knowledge of the Ticket to Work program
6. Utilization of the Ticket to Work program

Each focus group was tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed line-by-line to identify central themes. Based on participant responses, a model (known as the Employment Maze) was developed to more broadly understand their experiences. This model is presented visually below and described more fully on the next page.
Summary of Focus Group Phase: The Employment Maze

Three pathways to find employment were identified by participants:
(1) employment through informal networks (e.g., family and friends),
(2) employment through the VR system, and
(3) employment through ENs from the TTW program.
Of the three pathways, informal networks and the VR system were used to a great extent. In contrast, the TTW program was largely dismissed due to participants’ prior job-seeking experiences.

Specifically, early in the job hunt, participants held expectations that their efforts would result in meaningful positions. These expectations were held whether participants sought work through informal networks or the VR system.

Overtime, participants became frustrated with the job hunt when obstacles stood in the way. These frustrations included negative employer attitudes toward hiring workers with disabilities; limited, unreliable, and inaccessible transportation to and from job sites; and inadequate levels of formal education and job training to compete successfully within the job market. Frustrations were also experienced with the VR system. Participants felt counselors were unresponsive and non-collaborative when establishing work plans.

For many participants, disappointment eventually was experienced when they failed to find employment, despite efforts toward this goal. Some participants were successful with finding jobs, however, these successes were at times viewed as disappointing because positions did not fit the individual’s work goals or positions were considered low paying, temporary, and menial.

Lastly, participants became discouraged with the job market and VR system, and this general sense of discouragement tended to transfer to new job initiatives (specifically, TTW). Although many participants reported general awareness of the TTW program, accurate knowledge was quite limited. Given that prior efforts toward employment had failed, participants seemed skeptical of TTW and were unmotivated to learn more.

Despite obstacles and uncertainties, participants continued their job-seeking efforts. Therefore, this model can be best understood as a maze with participants entering the job-seeking process intermittently and with varying levels of motivation.
The purpose of the Survey Phase was to examine the employment, VR and TTW experiences of people with disabilities with a larger sample. Three hundred working-age adults completed the Disability and Employment Questionnaire. Participants were recruited from disability job fairs, community-based organizations that served the disability community, and a disability pride parade.

- Of the participants, 53% were men and 47% were women.

- The ethnic/racial background of participants was
  - 40% African American,
  - 29% Caucasian,
  - 22% Latino,
  - 7% other, and
  - 2% did not report.

- Participants’ types of disabilities included
  - 34% physical (mobility),
  - 20% cognitive/developmental,
  - 14% multiple,
  - 13% sensory (6% hearing and 7% visual),
  - 9% psychiatric,
  - 6% physical (medical/chronic illness),
  - 1% other, and
  - 3% did not report their disability.

- Regarding highest level of educational attainment,
  - 13% had not obtained a high school diploma,
  - 40% had obtained a high school diploma only,
  - 11% had a certificate from a training program,
  - 10% had Associates, 14% Bachelors, 6% Masters, and 2% Doctorate degrees,
  - 2% percent reported “other”, and
  - 2% did not report.

- The average monthly employment income of participants was $1,247. In addition, 66% of our participants were SSA beneficiaries and they received an average of $759 monthly.

- Although 90% of participants had previous employment experiences, only 38% were employed at the time of our survey.
Three hundred participants completed the Disability and Employment Questionnaire, which tapped issues related to:

- **Employment barriers** (32 items)
  For example: How concerned are you about transportation when you are looking for work?

- **VR concerns** (18 items)
  For example: To what extent have you had problems with VR counselors who are uninformed or lack knowledge about services?

- **TTW knowledge and utilization** (14 items)
  For example: How well did you understand the materials that came with the Ticket from the Ticket to Work program?

Estimated time to complete the survey ranged from 20 to 30 minutes, and in many cases the survey was administered with the assistance of the research team to ensure the readability and comprehension of items.

A Spanish version of the survey was available. In addition, sign-language interpreters, large print materials, and readers were used as needed.
Findings from the Survey Phase corroborated much of what was learned from our focus group participants. Key employment barriers, VR concerns, and TTW concerns are highlighted below:

- **Key Employment Barriers:**
  - Fear of losing existing medical benefits
  - Fear that cash benefits will be reduced or eliminated
  - Negative employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities
  - Lack of physical accessibility and reasonable accommodations at job sites
  - Insufficient levels of formal education to compete in the workforce
  - Lack of reliable transportation to and from job sites

- **Key VR Concerns:**
  - Quality of job placements (low-paying, temporary, menial)
  - Employment counselors who are unresponsive (fail to follow through with tasks, return calls, stay in touch)
  - Employment counselors who work in non-collaborative ways
  - Employment counselors who lack information about employment programs and services

- **Key TTW Concerns:**
  - Lack of awareness and knowledge of the TTW program among people with disabilities
  - Complexity of TTW materials that are used to market the program
  - Lack of TTW knowledge among service providers
  - Discouragement among people with disabilities when new employment initiatives are implemented
Summary of Town Hall Meeting: Objectives of Meeting

The purpose of the Town Hall Meeting was to bring together key stakeholders in order for them to hear about and reflect upon results from the Focus Group Phase and Survey Phase of our project. These stakeholders were an ethnically diverse group, with a large number of people with disabilities represented. In addition, Town Hall meeting participants partook in smaller work groups to discuss potential recommendations that would help address the employment, VR, and TTW concerns identified by our research.

Commissioner Karen Tamley from the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities provided opening remarks. Then, stakeholders were provided with an overview of the project, with its key findings. In addition, there were opportunities for them to present questions and comments to the research team. Lastly, stakeholders selected a work group to participate in, with the purpose of discussing action steps to address the concerns identified by the focus group and survey phases of the project. The three work groups were:

- Employment Barriers
- VR Concerns
- TTW Knowledge and Utilization

Recommendations (or Action steps) from the 3 groups are provided in pages 12 through 14 of this report.
Summary of Town Hall Meeting: Description of Participants

Thirty-one individuals participated in the **Town Hall Meeting**. They represented the local city government, service providers, EN personnel, the VR system, legal advocacy organizations, and the disability community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maricela Hernandez</td>
<td>Access Living of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah Triano</td>
<td>Access Living of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devon Whitmore</td>
<td>Access Living of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rob Rotman</td>
<td>Chicago Adapt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earl Jordan</td>
<td>Chicago Workforce Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joe Chiappetta</td>
<td><em>disabilityworks</em> (Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce)</td>
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<td>Karen McCulloh</td>
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<td>Alan Goldstein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin Irvine</td>
<td>Equip for Equality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcie Frawley</td>
<td>Health &amp; Disability Advocates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louis Hamer</td>
<td>Illinois Department of Human Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michelle Lawrence</td>
<td>Illinois Department of Human Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greg Polman</td>
<td>Chicago Lighthouse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karen Tamley</td>
<td>Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosemary McDonnell</td>
<td>Mayor's Office of Workforce Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Delgade</td>
<td>Progress Center for Independent Living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura Obara</td>
<td>Progress Center for Independent Living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally Richards</td>
<td>Northwest Suburban Employment &amp;Training Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Capraro</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Azi Ghaffari</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago</td>
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<td>Robert Trierwellier</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ramon Canellada</td>
<td>Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura Gonzales</td>
<td>Seguin Services Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Marshall</td>
<td>Social Security Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janet Thomas</td>
<td>Thresholds Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anel Gonzalez</td>
<td>Disability &amp; Business Technical Assistance Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen Aguilar</td>
<td>Community Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ken Borst</td>
<td>Community Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joan Porter</td>
<td>Community Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nelly Vasaquez</td>
<td>Community Member</td>
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## Employment Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Barrier</th>
<th>Action Step</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fear of losing medical benefits</td>
<td>a) Provide universal medical coverage to all citizens</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b) Ensure that people with disabilities are fully aware of how their benefits are impacted by employment (e.g., increase information about benefits planning; increase the presence of benefits planners; improve the clarity, readability, and accessibility of written materials regarding SSA work incentive rules and benefits planning)</td>
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<td>2. Fear that cash benefits will be reduced or eliminated</td>
<td>c) Expand the availability of benefits planners and work incentive information to high school students with disabilities</td>
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<td>d) Utilize disabled peers to help inform people with disabilities about the added benefits of employment and private medical insurance</td>
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<td>3. Negative employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities</td>
<td>a) Improve/increase education to the business community about their responsibilities under the ADA</td>
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<td>b) Utilize business leaders to help inform the business community about the value and talents of the disabled workforce</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c) Better inform people with disabilities of their legal rights (and enforcement procedures) under the ADA</td>
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<td>4. Lack of physical accessibility and reasonable accommodations at job sites</td>
<td>a) Develop and disseminate “best practices” guidelines that address the disclosure of disability status and request for accommodations; these guidelines should be available to both employers and potential employees</td>
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<td>5. Insufficient levels of formal education to compete in the workforce</td>
<td>a) Early on, provide educational and professional opportunities that emphasize career development (not just job placement) to students with disabilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b) Provide VR services to high school students with disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Lack of reliable transportation to and from job sites</td>
<td>a) Prioritize the availability of public transportation for people with disabilities interested in entering the workforce</td>
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<td>b) Continue collaborating with public transportation to ensure the accessibility of public buses and trains</td>
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**February, 2007**
Vocational Rehabilitation Recommendations

**VR Concern**

1. Quality of job placements (many are low paying, temporary, and menial)
   - a) Encourage the VR system to advocate for and seek better job placements in the business community
   - b) Encourage the VR system to move beyond the job placement model to a career-planning model when working with consumers
   - c) Provide peer counseling and peer networks to better inform people with disabilities about the job market and variety of positions available

2. Employment counselors who are unresponsive (fail to follow through with tasks, return calls, stay in touch)
   - a) Assess and (if needed) reduce the caseload of VR counselors in order for more “quality” time to be spent with consumers on their individualized work plans
   - b) Increase the number of VR counselors with disabilities

3. Employment counselors who work in non-collaborative ways
   - a) Assess and (if needed) reduce the caseload of VR counselors in order for more “quality” time to be spent with consumers on their individualized work plans
   - b) Increase the number of VR counselors with disabilities
   - c) Periodically assess consumers’ satisfaction with services and make adjustments to the VR system as needed
   - d) Provide on-going training to VR counselors to improve their customer service skills
   - e) Build incentives for VR counselors who demonstrate “excellent” customer service skills
   - f) Educate consumers about having realistic expectations of the VR system
   - g) Educate consumers about their rights within the VR system to promote self-advocacy

4. Employment counselors who lack information about employment programs and services
   - a) Provide on-going workshops and training to VR counselors to ensure that they are fully informed about the various employment programs that are available
   - b) Periodically assess VR counselors’ knowledge of employment programs and concentrate future training efforts on areas of need
   - c) Increase collaboration with other community and employment agencies, and recognize that the employment crisis experienced by the disability community is a societal problem that will not likely be address with any amount of significant success by the VR system alone
# Ticket to Work

## Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TTW Concern</th>
<th>Action Step</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Lack of awareness and knowledge of the TTW program among people with disabilities</td>
<td>a) Increase awareness of the TTW program on the grassroots level&lt;br&gt;b) Design and display simple-to-read and visually-appealing posters that highlight key information about the program in establishments that consumers frequent (for example, grocery stores, churches)&lt;br&gt;c) Follow-up with consumers who have received the Ticket to assess their understanding of the program and respond to their questions and concerns&lt;br&gt;d) Provide ongoing training to current and future disability service providers about TTW; oftentimes, consumer awareness and understanding of programs are dependent on the awareness and understanding of these programs among service providers&lt;br&gt;e) Periodically assess service providers’ knowledge of the TTW program and concentrate future training efforts on areas of need</td>
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<td>2. Complexity of TTW materials that are used to market the program</td>
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<td>3. Lack of TTW knowledge among service providers</td>
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<td>4. Discouragement among people with disabilities when new employment initiatives are implemented</td>
<td>a) Highlight how TTW is different from other existing employment programs&lt;br&gt;b) Expand the availability of benefits planners to ensure that consumers are fully aware how their benefits will be impacted by employment&lt;br&gt;c) Encourage employment counselors and benefits planners to help consumers realize the added benefits that come with employment</td>
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February, 2007
Conclusion

The main purpose of the Let’s Roll Project was to examine the employment barriers experienced by people with disabilities, with an additional focus on their vocational rehabilitation (VR) and Ticket to Work (TTW) experiences. This three-year project revealed that although there have been attempts to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, much work remains. In particular, our participants reported concerns with 1) losing medical and cash benefits, 2) the accessibility of their communities and worksites, 3) employer attitudes toward the disabled workforce, and 4) the vocational rehabilitation system.

Although the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999 responds to several employment concerns reported by people with disabilities, our findings indicated that our participants were not knowledgeable about this well-intended legislation. In addition, there seemed to be reluctance to learn about and participate in the Ticket to Work program, given that past employment and vocational rehabilitation efforts had not paid off.

Therefore, it is critical that we reach out to the disability community to ensure that they have accurate knowledge of new employment initiatives, have their concerns addressed, and are connected to employment services and programs in meaningful ways.