

**Employment, Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Ticket to Work Program:  
Perspectives of Latinos with Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the employment, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and Ticket to Work (TTW) needs of Latinos with disabilities. Seven focus groups were conducted with 45 working-age Latinos, who were either working or seeking employment. Top barriers to

employment included lack of adequate transportation, difficulties with speaking the English language, inadequate levels of formal education, and negative employer attitudes toward disabled workers. In addition, participants expressed concerns with the VR system and counselors' lack of responsiveness and collaboration. To a lesser extent, participants reported prejudiced attitudes on the basis of ethnic minority status among employers and VR counselors. Although over a third of the sample reported general awareness of the TTW program, accurate knowledge was sorely limited. Further, only one participant attempted to use his Ticket, with no success. Using a grounded theory approach, a model was developed to better understand the experiences of Latinos with disabilities as they sought work. This model highlights three specific pathways to work (i.e., informal networks, the VR system, and the TTW program), as well as obstacles that are encountered with each pathway. Of serious concern is the TTW pathway, which was largely ignored.

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**Executive Summary**

Despite a long history of disability employment policy, disabled Americans continue to struggle within the labor market. For people of color, these struggles are even more pronounced. Research indicates racial differences in vocational rehabilitation utilization and employment outcomes (Olney & Kennedy, 2002). Although many studies have examined the variables of

race/ethnicity and vocational rehabilitation, to the authors' knowledge no study has done so in an in-depth, rich manner. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the employment, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and Ticket to Work (TTW) needs of Latinos with disabilities.

Forty-five Latinos with varying types of disabilities participated in one of seven focus groups. Participants were of working age (aged 18-64), and were either employed or seeking employment. Using a grounded theory approach to analyze the focus group data, the top barriers to employment were identified, and they included lack of adequate transportation options, difficulties with speaking the English language, inadequate levels of formal education, and negative employer attitudes toward disabled workers. Participants also expressed concerns with the VR system. Specifically, they reported that counselors failed to follow through with tasks discussed and were non-collaborative when developing work plans. To some extent, participants reported prejudiced attitudes on the basis of ethnic minority status among employers and VR counselors. Although over a third of the participants reported general awareness of the TTW program, very few had accurate knowledge. For example, when asked to explain TTW in their own words, one participant thought it was a job bank and another thought that he needed to inform SSA if he was working. This lack of understanding led to a number of individuals throwing the Ticket away. Further, over a third of the participants, who reported general awareness of TTW, were unable to understand the program due to difficulties with reading English; they did not receive the Ticket and its accompanying materials in Spanish. Only one participant attempted to use his Ticket by contacting an Employment Network (EN). However, he was not offered services because his disability was considered too severe.

A model was developed to better understand the complex experiences of Latinos with disabilities as they sought work using three distinct pathways: 1) employment through informal

networks (e.g., friends, family members); 2) employment through the vocational rehabilitation (VR) system; and 3) employment through ENs from the TTW program. Of the three pathways, participants utilized the first two to a great degree. However, the Ticket to Work program was largely ignored. To understand why TTW was not viewed as a viable option, it is important to understand participants' prior experiences with seeking work through informal networks and the VR system. More specifically, early in the job-seeking process, participants held *expectations* that their efforts would result in jobs that were well-paying, long-term, and meaningful. With time, they became *frustrated* with the job hunt when obstacles stood in the way. *Disappointment* set in when participants failed to find employment, despite concerted efforts toward this goal. Lastly, they became *discouraged* with the job market and VR system, and this general sense of discouragement transferred to new job initiatives (namely, TTW).

Based on findings from the focus groups, a quantitative measure was constructed to further research in this significant area. The Disability and Employment Questionnaire will allow researchers to collect data in a time-efficient manner from a large number of individuals, thus providing a comprehensive picture of employment concerns and needs.

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***Introduction***

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 marked a new era in our history. The ADA is considered the most comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities to date, and the ultimate vision of this far-reaching legislation is to fully include those with disabilities into all aspects of society, including employment, state and local government

services, transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications. Although many have benefited from this powerful law, there is a dire need to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The employment rate for working-age adults with disabilities has been a long-standing and well-recognized problem. People with disabilities are three times more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled persons (United States Department of Labor, 2002). This stark reality is of grave concern. Work not only provides a means for obtaining basic material needs, it is also closely tied to psychological outcomes of self-esteem and self-worth (Belgrave, 1998).

People with disabilities who are members of ethnic minority groups face an even harsher reality. African-Americans have unemployment rates ranging from 81% to 31% for severe and non-severe disabilities, respectively. Latinos face similar circumstances, where 79% and 29% with severe disabilities and non-severe disabilities are unemployed, respectively (Adams & Marano, 1995). It is also important to understand that poverty is related to race/ethnicity and disability. In analyses of national data sets, Fujiura and Yamaki (2000) found that disabled Americans of ethnic minority background had greater odds of living in poverty than Caucasians with disabilities. Thus, employment is especially significant for members of ethnic groups because it provides a means to strive for equality within our society (Belgrave, 1998). Furthermore, ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the disability community, and this overrepresentation increases dramatically when older age groups are examined (Bradsher, 1995).

A core element of the American disability policy is to assist people with disabilities in their pursuit of employment goals. Each year, approximately 2 billion dollars in federal grants, matched by 645 million dollars in state and local funds, are allocated to state-governed vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs. Services provided by such programs include:

vocational assessment and evaluation; academic, business, and vocational training; employment counseling; and job placement and referral (Kaye, 1998).

The VR system has been, at best, minimally successful. During the 1995 fiscal year, approximately 1.3 million people participated in VR programs. Of those served, approximately 16% were considered rehabilitated, defined as having completed their rehabilitation program and been suitably employed for at least 60 days. Of individuals exiting without rehabilitation, a majority of cases cited the lack of client participation ("refused services" or "failed to cooperate") or inability to locate the client (Kaye, 1998). Latinos with disabilities experience particular challenges within the VR system. Research indicates that members of ethnic minority groups were less likely to be accepted into VR programs (Capella, 2002; Dziekan & Okoncha, 1993) and more likely to be placed on waiting lists (Zea, Belgrave, Garcia, & Quezada, 1997) when compared to Caucasians. Further, Olney and Kennedy (2002) found that Latinos who utilized VR services were more likely to receive less competitive job training and more likely to be living in poverty than Caucasians.

In response to poor employment outcomes for disabled Americans, the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act was passed in 1999. In addition to providing protection of medical benefits (Medicaid and Medicare) for individuals with disabilities entering the workforce, the Act allows them to obtain VR and employment services from their choice of participating public and private providers. The Ticket to Work (TTW) and Self-Sufficiency Program, created under the 1999 Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act, aims to help interested individuals achieve and maintain meaningful employment while decreasing their dependence on benefits provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA).

Central to the TTW Program is the creation of Employment Networks (ENs). These public or private organizations provide ticket-holders with vocational training, job placement, and employment support/retention services. Once ticket-holders receive a Ticket by mail, they can call an information number and receive information about local ENs. After selecting an EN to work with, both parties help formulate an Individual Work Plan, which outlines the individual's employment goals and services necessary to achieve them. ENs are funded by SSA as their clients move into the workforce and toward permanent employment.

As disability laws and programs (such as TTW) are enacted, a persistent challenge has been ensuring that adequate knowledge and information of these laws and programs exist among Americans with disabilities. A prime example of the public lacking knowledge about disability laws is evident in research about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Louis Harris and Associates' surveys (1994; 1998) indicate that many individuals with disabilities are not aware of the ADA. Similarly, Hernandez, Keys, and Balcazar (2003) found that representatives of the private and public sector demonstrated minimal ADA knowledge when they were tested about major provisions of the law. Cognizant of this knowledge-challenge, Golden, O'Mara, Ferrell, and Sheldon (2000) published an article that provides a primer on the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act. A main thrust of their paper centers on building the knowledge and skills of practitioners (including rehabilitation counselors, insurance rehabilitation specialists, transition planners, advocate and peer counselors, supported employment personnel, and vocational evaluators) to ensure that they competently work in this specialized area. Equally important is assessing and building the knowledge among working-age adults with disabilities, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of disability laws and programs. In fact, a report prepared by the Social Security Advisory Board included the need for *a carefully designed survey to help*

*gauge the extent of misunderstanding and to identify the areas which might be most promising for better public information or simplification* (Social Security Advisory Board, 2003, p. 15).

### ***Purposes of the Study***

Prior studies concerning vocational rehabilitation services have relied primarily on reviewing databases and finding relationships between demographic variables and VR outcomes (Capella, 2002; Dziekan & Okoncha, 1993; Zea et al., 1997). To the authors' knowledge, no study has examined the experiences of VR recipients in an in-depth, rich manner; even less investigated are the experiences of ethnic minorities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the concerns and needs of Latinos with disabilities as they attempt to gain employment and use programs that are intended to help with this goal. Such an examination may shed light on possible factors affecting their vocational and employment success. Specifically, focus groups were conducted with Latinos with disabilities, who were either employed or seeking employment. The focus group questions tapped the concerns and needs of participants as they related to 1) employment, 2) vocational rehabilitation, and 3) the newly-implemented Ticket to Work program. Another purpose of this study was to use results from the focus groups to inform the development of a quantitative questionnaire that tapped these three domains. Increasingly, disability researchers and scholars are acknowledging the importance of developing questionnaires that are informed by people with disabilities (LaPlante, Kaye, Mullan, & Wong, 2004). This proposed instrument would allow future researchers to collect data from a large pool of individuals in a time-efficient manner.

### ***Method***



Qualitative methodology (namely focus groups) was used to explore the central issues that Latinos with disabilities confront when they seek to improve their employability through VR services and the TTW program. Qualitative research is primarily an inductive process; thus, a priori assumptions and hypotheses are avoided. Instead, post-hoc conclusions are reached once all data have been coded and analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Taylor & Bodgan, 1998). This research methodology is particularly useful when researchers are exploring a new or under-investigated phenomenon (such as knowledge and utilization of VR services and the Ticket to Work program). A focus group convenes participants for a set time-period to speak openly about common experiences. Strengths of a focus group include the ability to produce concentrated data on precisely the topic of interest and reliance on the interaction or *synergy* of the group to produce data (Morgan, 1997).

### ***Participants***

To be included in this study, participants met the following criteria: being a Latino adult of working-age (aged 18 to 64), having a disability, and having employment or employment seeking experiences. These criteria were established in order to obtain information from disabled Latinos who had direct experience with the employment process. In addition, an effort was made to have varying disabilities represented. Focus group participants were recruited from a rehabilitation hospital and disability-related employment agency located in a large Midwestern city. Both sites are located in Latino neighborhoods. Flyers were used for recruitment and were available and posted in English and Spanish. Copies were also available in large print and Braille. These flyers instructed interested individuals to contact the researchers for more information about the study. The researchers made determinations regarding eligibility criteria

and accommodation needs (including Braille materials, note-takers, readers, and sign-language interpreters). Interested and eligible individuals were then invited to participate in one of seven focus groups. Participants were compensated for their time and effort (\$50 cash), and the focus groups were facilitated project staff, who were bilingual and especially trained and experienced with conducting focus groups. One of the two group facilitators was disabled. Focus groups were held primarily in Spanish, with English translation provided as needed.

### *Instrument*

The focus group protocol was developed with the expertise and experience of a five-member research team. Two of the researchers were disabled; two were Latino; and one had ten years of disability-related research experience. Broad and open-ended questions were developed, with follow-up questions added during the groups as deemed necessary for the purposes of clarification. The eight research questions were:

1. Have you ever heard of vocational rehabilitation (or VR) services/programs?
2. What types of VR services have you received? What was this experience like?
3. What were the strengths (or positives) of the VR program?
4. What were the weaknesses (or negatives) of the VR program?
5. Do you know about the Ticket to Work program? What do you know?
6. What are your personal experiences with using the Ticket to Work program?
7. Have any of these factors affected your ability to get a job? If so, how?
  - a. Your level of education or vocational training
  - b. The accessibility of your home
  - c. Transportation

- d. Members of your family
  - e. Child care
  - f. Difficulties with the English language
8. What has helped you get a job?

### ***Procedure***

Focus groups were conducted in conference rooms at the rehabilitation hospital and disability-related employment agency, which were both physically accessible. Prior to the focus groups being conducted, each participant met with a researcher individually to review and obtain informed consent. After the consent process and prior to the focus group, each participant completed a demographic questionnaire to gather information about age, sex, level of education, racial/ethnic background, income, type of disability, living arrangement, employment history, and prior experiences with employment programs. The estimated time to complete the consent process, demographic questionnaire, and participation in the focus group averaged 2.5 hours.

All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. NVivo qualitative software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2000) was used to enter and organize transcriptions. Transcriptions were analyzed line-by-line using qualitative methods (specifically, a grounded theory approach). Grounded theory dictates that data emerge from the experiences of participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This process involved coding data using a three-level approach, consisting of descriptive coding (naming), interpretive coding (categorizing), and pattern coding (themes) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, each group transcription was reviewed and coded independently by two researchers to determine the percentage of agreement in terms of coded units. Consensus was reached for those units where there was initial disagreement. This

systematic procedure allowed project staff to identify the most central concerns and needs and to develop a model to better understand participants' experiences.

### ***Results***

Seven focus groups were conducted, with a total of 45 Latinos with disabilities. See Table 1 for a display of their demographic characteristics. In sum, 67% of the participants were male; 33% female. Seventy-one percent were between the ages of 18 and 39. Forty-seven percent had physical, 18% cognitive/developmental, 16% multiple, 13% sensory, 4% medical/chronic illness, and 2% psychiatric disabilities. Of the 7 participants who reported multiple disabilities, 3 had a cognitive/developmental disability, 1 had a psychiatric disability, and 1 had a visual disability. Forty percent had a high school diploma only, while 22% had not obtained a high school diploma. Fifty-one percent reported a monthly income level of less than \$1000. Eighty-four percent had prior work experience; however, only 11% were employed at the time of the focus group. Sixty-four percent had used vocational rehabilitation services, and only *one* individual had attempted to use the Ticket to Work program.

Descriptive coding of the interviews, whereby units of interview data were labeled on a descriptive or "naming" level, generated a total of 97 codes. Appendix 1 displays 1) the codes, 2) definitions for each code, 3) number of times each code was mentioned across the seven groups, and 4) number of participants who reported each code. The average "reliability" agreement across the seven groups among two independent coders for the 97 descriptive codes was 65%, with additional discussion occurring among the coders until 100% consensus was obtained. Interpretive analysis of the 97 descriptive codes indicated that the majority could be placed under

three broad categories: 1) employment, 2) vocational rehabilitation, and 3) the Ticket to Work program.

### ***Employment***

Employment was a significant category that emerged from participant data. Specifically, 35 codes related to different aspects of employment, with the most frequently mentioned aspect relating to employment obstacles. First, over one-third of the participants (36%) reported significant problems with transportation and employment. Some individuals simply lacked transportation options; others struggled with having reliable and accessible transportation. Second, the inability to speak the English language was viewed as inhibiting job opportunities by almost one-quarter of the sample (24%). Third, close to a quarter of the group (24%) acknowledged that the lack of formal education decreased employment options. For some, there was concern because they lacked a high school diploma. Others expressed a need for college education to obtain well-paying and meaningful positions. Lastly, 24% of the participants felt that they were discriminated by employers on the basis of their disability. Quotes that reflected these four barriers included:

*Participant: It takes two hours to get home and two hours to get to work.*

*Participant: Somebody will come and say, "My lift (bus) is not working? Somebody else is coming to pick you up, okay." Sometimes they'll go, "Sorry." And they'll just, sometimes they don't even try.*

*Participant: She (employer) said, "Do you have a degree from high school? Do you have a diploma? Do you have a high school diploma from your country?" And I said, "No. I was in the eighth grade and that's as far as I went."*

*Participant: I think I need more education in English because I hardly know how to speak English. I can understand, but I can't speak it.*

*Participant: Yes, we are trying to find work and were told they hired people with disabilities, but only those in wheelchairs. And we said, "We may be the first (with visual disabilities) and try us." They never called us.*

Forty percent of the participants felt that the best way to find out about employment opportunities was through informal networks. Family members and friends were viewed as good sources of such information. However, having information about job openings did not necessarily result in actual employment, as reflected in the 11% employment rate of the sample at the time of the focus group. In addition to negative employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities, a number of participants reported prejudiced attitudes based on their racial/ethnic background (11%). For example, a couple of Spanish-speaking participants described discriminatory treatment by employers who questioned their U.S. citizen status and ability to work.

### ***Vocational Rehabilitation***

Another area of great concern dealt with vocational rehabilitation services, with 43 codes emerging from focus group data. Twenty-nine participants (64%) reported prior experiences with the VR system. Types of services received included educational services (21%), assistive devices (21%), job training (31%), and job placement (38%). The majority of the VR codes focused on the client-counselor relationship. Specifically, of the 29 participants who used VR services, 55% felt that VR counselors were unresponsive, particularly when they failed to return telephone calls and follow through with specific tasks that were discussed during appointments (for example, offering but never providing job placement services). Participants also felt that counselors held the power in VR relationships because they tended to develop work plans in a non-collaborative manner (41%). For instance, a participant requested job training to make him more competitive

in the job market. Instead, he was provided with placement in a job that was low-paying and menial. These client-counselor experiences are reflected in the following quotes.

*Participant: We all want the same thing. We want something quickly. After two or three months, not to have an interview. People become unmotivated.*

*Participant: At the very least, if they (counselors) stayed in contact with you.*

*Participant: They (counselors) also had us complete paperwork and they never found us a job. They would tell us to come and we wouldn't know why we were coming. They just wanted us to complete paperwork.*

*Participant: I had an experience like that too. When ORS (Office of Rehabilitation Services) referred me to vocational rehab to apply, they gave me a survey to answer phones like a telemarketer. And I told them that I never liked telemarketing and that's why I never received services.*

Further, 21% of the participants who used VR services reported experiencing prejudiced attitudes from VR counselors on the basis of their racial/ethnic background. They shared that Latino counselors tended to be more attentive and responsive. These participants expressed a need for more Latino counselors to minimize language barriers and help establish trusting relationships.

On a more positive note, 21% of the participants reported that they had VR counselors who were committed. In particular, counselors were quite responsive when addressing concrete needs, such as the provision of transportation cards, wheelchairs, computers, food, and home modifications. However, the VR system was weaker when addressing employment needs. A number of participants who were placed in jobs by the VR system expressed dissatisfaction with these jobs, describing them as poor-paying, short-term, and not reflective of their work potential (36%). Consider this quote from a participant with a Bachelor's degree, who was placed in a job by the VR system.

*Participant: Yeah, it is very depressing. Now, I am in this job (cutting strings from clothing), which is ridiculous to me, because I might have a disability, but I can think, right.*

### ***Ticket to Work Program***

Over one-third of the sample (38%) reported general awareness of the TTW program. However, most participants did not respond to it. Reasons for not responding included the physical appearance of the Ticket (*It looked like junk mail*) and complex language of the Ticket and its accompanying materials (36%). In fact, there was a great deal of misinformation about the program; 11 of 17 participants (or 65%) were misinformed. When asked to explain the program in their own words, one participant thought it was a job bank, another thought that he needed to inform SSA if he was working, and another thought TTW was exclusively about protection of medical benefits. For a number of participants, this confusion led to throwing the Ticket away. Further, 36% percent were unable to understand the TTW program due to difficulties with reading English; these participants did not receive the Ticket and its accompanying materials in Spanish. Quotes from participants that related to the Ticket to Work program included:

*Participant: You know what...that Ticket to Work is very complicated to understand. I went to training in Columbus, Ohio, and I know about it and I know how it works. And it's not easy for a consumer to understand it, if all they receive in the mail is a Ticket, and they throw it away.*

*Participant: It's not only the people who are misinformed, it's also the agencies that are connected with the program.*

*Participant: I received it (the Ticket) and I got a letter. At that time, I was not doing well. When I read the letter, I didn't understand anything that the letter said and I was like OK. Actually, I think I threw it away.*

Only one participant attempted to use the Ticket by contacting an EN. According to this participant, when he explained that he was quadriplegic, they stated that his disability was too



severe. Thus, he was not provided with job-related services. Another participant took the Ticket to his VR counselor, but was only offered computer training that he was not interested in. Lastly, another participant was told by her VR counselor that the TTW program had terminated.

### *Differences by Type of Disability*

When examining participants' responses by type of disability, those with physical (mobility) disabilities expressed the greatest concerns with issues of physical accessibility. In addition to being concerned with the accessibility of work sites (14%), they were concerned with the accessibility of their homes (27%). Stairs at the entrance were cited as the biggest problem. Two participants with learning disabilities were concerned with their abilities to complete job applications and written exams; they highlighted needing assistance with understanding complex questions. Five of seven participants with sensory disabilities (visual or hearing) felt that VR counselors developed work plans that were inconsistent with their own goals. In addition, those with visual disabilities felt that employment resources for their disability group were limited, given that they were offered primarily by one agency.

### *A Model to Understand the Experiences of Latinos with Disabilities and Employment*

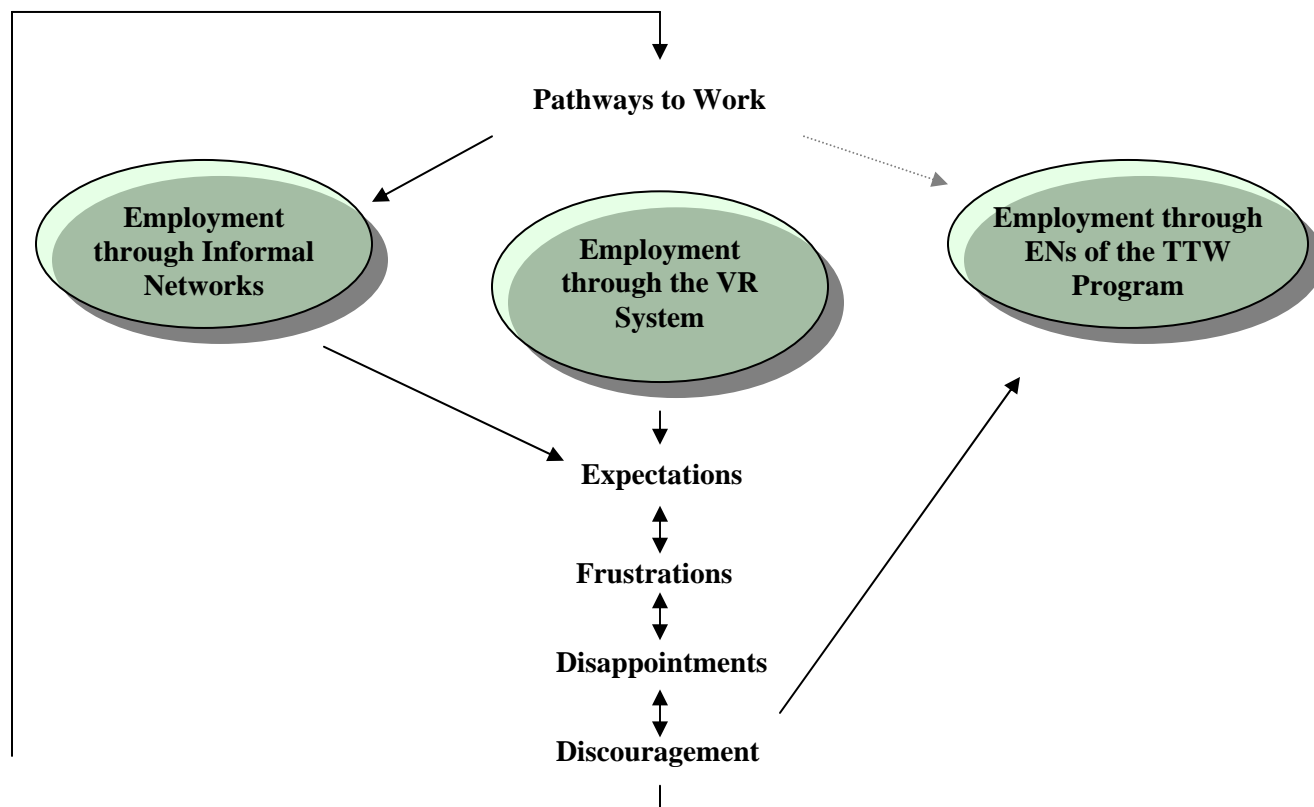
Thematic analysis of the 97 descriptive codes and 3 categories resulted in the development of a model (see Figure 1). This model visually displays the complex experiences of participants as they sought work using three distinct pathways: 1) employment through informal networks (e.g., friends, family members); 2) employment through the vocational rehabilitation system; and 3) employment through Employment Networks from the Ticket to Work program. Of the three pathways, participants utilized the first two to a great degree. In contrast, the Ticket to Work program was largely ignored. In order to understand why TTW was not viewed as a

viable option, it is important to understand participants' prior experiences with seeking work through informal networks and the VR system. More specifically, participants moved through a series of experiences that are outlined below.

- a) Early in the job-seeking process, participants held *expectations* that their efforts would result in jobs that were well-paying, long-term, and meaningful.
- b) With time, participants became *frustrated* with the job hunt when obstacles stood in the way. They experienced frustration with limited, unreliable, and inaccessible transportation options, language barriers, inadequate levels of formal education, and negative employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities. Frustrations were also experienced with the VR system. Namely, participants felt counselors were misinformed, unresponsive, and establishing work plans that were different from their own plans. Lastly, to some extent, participants experienced prejudiced attitudes on the basis of their ethnic minority status among employers and VR counselors.
- c) *Disappointment* set in when participants failed to find employment, despite concerted efforts toward this goal. For a few participants, there were successes with finding jobs. However, these successes were also viewed as disappointing because positions were not well-paying, long-term, or meaningful.
- d) Lastly, participants became *discouraged* with the job market and VR system, and this general sense of discouragement transferred to new job initiatives (specifically, TTW). It was evident that participants did not view TTW as a viable option to seek employment, and even upon learning about the program they wondered if it was "business as usual." Participants were skeptical and unmotivated to learn about the program, given that their prior efforts toward employment had failed.

Despite these obstacles and uncertainties, many participants continued their job seeking efforts. Thus, this model can be best understood as a maze with participants entering the job-seeking process intermittently and with varying levels of motivation.

**FIGURE 1: LATINOS WITH DISABILITIES AND THE EMPLOYMENT MAZE**



***Construction of the Disability and Employment Questionnaire***

In addition to exploring the needs of Latinos with disabilities as they pursued their employment goals, a secondary purpose of this study was to use focus group data to inform the development of a quantitative questionnaire to assess this domain. Such a questionnaire would allow researchers to collect data from a large pool of individuals in a timely manner. Appendix 2 presents the Disability and Employment Questionnaire. It includes a total of 85 items (with 21

items tapping demographic characteristics, 32 items employment concerns, 18 items employment programs, and 14 items the Ticket to Work program).

The content and face validity of the survey were established by a team of individuals, who had expertise in the areas of questionnaire development, disability, employment, vocational rehabilitation, and the Ticket to Work program. This survey was piloted with three individuals who had a disability in order to improve its clarity and readability. The English-version of the survey was translated into Spanish, using a double translation procedure (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973). Although this questionnaire was created with the Latino community in mind, the majority of the items are relevant to the general disability population.

### **Discussion**

The purposes of this study were to explore in an in-depth manner the employment, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and Ticket to Work (TTW) needs of Latinos with disabilities. From 45 participants, we learned that Latinos with disabilities are motivated to work, and actively seeking employment opportunities. However, as members of this group pursued job-related goals, a number of obstacles stood in the way. These obstacles included a lack of adequate transportation options, difficulties with speaking the English language, inadequate levels of formal education, and negative employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities. Furthermore, Latinos with disabilities were concerned with the VR system and counselors' lack of responsiveness and collaboration. For those placed in jobs by the VR system, there was also concern about positions being low-paying, temporary, and menial. To a lesser extent, participants reported prejudiced attitudes among employers and VR counselors, given participants' racial/ethnic background. Experiences of discrimination on the basis of both ethnic minority

status and disability have been viewed by some researchers as *dual disadvantage* (Olney & Kennedy, 2002; Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2001). Thus, for disabled people of color, challenges within the labor market and VR system are even more pronounced than for the general disability community.

To better understand the experiences of Latinos with disabilities as they sought work, a model was developed based on focus group data. This model highlights three specific pathways to work: 1) seeking employment through informal networks; 2) seeking employment with the assistance of the VR system; and 3) seeking employment through ENs of the TTW program. Latinos used the first two pathways to a great degree; in contrast, the TTW pathway was largely ignored. Dismissal of the TTW program was rooted partly in participants' prior job-seeking efforts. When Latinos have used informal networks and the VR system pathways, they have gone through a set of experiences that include: 1) having *expectations* of finding work, 2) experiencing *frustrations* when obstacles stood in the way of achieving this goal, 3) being *disappointed* when their employment status remained unchanged, and 4) becoming *discouraged* with the job market and employment initiatives. Having had these experiences, Latinos tended to view new employment initiatives as *business as usual*. In other words, when past efforts have failed, why would TTW work? Furthermore, it did not help that the TTW program was not marketed in culturally appropriate ways; namely, many participants did not receive the Ticket in Spanish, the language used in the TTW materials was complex, and the physical appearance of the Ticket created the appearance of junk mail.

Given the aforementioned findings, a number of recommendations are made to help address the employment needs of disabled Latinos. The first recommendation highlights the need to develop and expand programs to improve English language proficiency. Participants

recognized that language was a barrier to employment success, and expressed a desire to work on this area. One recommendation (offered by a participant) was to introduce the English language via an immersion experience, whereby Latinos would learn English relevant to work sites.

Second, participants acknowledged that a higher level of formal education was needed to be competitive within the job market and obtain jobs that were well-paying, long-term, and meaningful. Depending on the individual, this education would vary from obtaining a high school diploma, earning a training program certificate, and/or enrolling in a community college or university. It is important to emphasize the need of further education for Latino workers who are disabled. Olney and Kennedy (2002) noted that this group lags behind in the area of academic attainment. Using a large database of VR consumers, the authors found that 82% of European Americans were high school graduates, compared to 65% of Latinos.

Third, VR counselors need to improve their relationships with Latino clients. Having Spanish-speaking personnel to address language barriers is one way to improve these relationships. However, cultural barriers remain, and counselors need to work on developing rapport and trust with clients from diverse backgrounds. In addition, work plans need to be developed in a collaborative manner. Part of developing collaborative work plans may entail checking-in with Latinos over time to ensure that their needs and concerns are being heard and addressed. Although it is understood that counselors have high caseloads, counselors need to return telephone calls in a timely manner and follow through with specific tasks that were discussed with their clients. Failure to do so results in Latinos not being responsive to or fully invested in employment initiatives. Furthermore, one area of great need among disabled Latinos was the availability and reliability of transportation. Thus, counselors should be aware and account for this need when developing work plans.

Lastly, it is imperative that marketing of new job initiatives (such as TTW) be conducted in ways that are culturally competent, particularly since Latinos have become discouraged with previous employment-related programs. In addition to providing materials in Spanish, materials should be easy-to-understand, keeping in mind Latinos' limited level of formal education. It would also be helpful to follow-up mailings with telephone calls to explain the program further and respond to questions and concerns. This recommendation coincides with an observation made by the Social Security Advisory Board (2003), which found that the maze of various incentives may be *intimidating and a source of beneficiary fear*. Moreover, TTW marketing concerns are not exclusive to Latinos. A preliminary evaluation report of the Ticket to Work program from the perspective of EN representatives indicated that the program was not being marketed effectively to beneficiaries and that better outreach and explanation of TTW were needed (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2004).

### ***Disability and Employment Questionnaire***

To further research, focus group data were used to inform the development of a quantitative questionnaire. This questionnaire will allow researchers to collect data from a large pool of participants, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of employment concerns and needs. Although this questionnaire was designed with Latinos in mind, concerns related to employment, vocational rehabilitation, and the Ticket to Work program extend to all working-age adults with disabilities.

### ***Limitations***

Limitations of this study need to be considered. Forty-five Latinos participated in a focus group, where they provided rich data regarding their employment experiences. However, generalizing findings beyond this group needs to be done with caution, keeping in mind the small sample size, ethnic background of participants, under-representation of individuals with psychiatric disabilities, and geographic location of the study. It is also important to keep in mind that participants were recruited in response to flyers that were posted at two disability-related sites. Thus, participants represented a convenience sample, and findings may have differed if a wider pool of potential participants and random selection were used. A related limitation is that our percentages for types of disabilities did not closely correspond with SSA's beneficiary population. For instance, SSA has a higher percentage of individuals with mental impairments than was represented in this study (24%). Our sample was also predominantly male (67%). Despite these two limitations in sample representation, it is significant to note that our general findings were consistent irrespective of disability type or sex.

Additionally, a quantitative questionnaire was developed, and its content and face validity were established with a team of experts. However, other psychometric properties of the questionnaire (reliability and validity) need to be established, and this area merits further investigation.

### ***Conclusion***

Latinos with disabilities have employment needs and concerns that are unique to their group. Language barriers, limited formal education, and perceived discrimination on the basis of ethnic minority status and disability have been obstacles to employment success. As new



employment initiatives are implemented, it is vital that efforts to outreach and serve the Latino community be responsive, collaborative, and culturally-competent.

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Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*  
(n = 45)

Characteristic	n	%	Characteristic	n	%
<i>Sex</i>			<i>VR Use</i>		
Male	30	66.7	Yes	29	64.4
Female	15	33.3	No	16	35.6

<i>Age</i>			<i>TTW Use</i>		
18-29	17	37.8	Yes	1	2.2
30-39	15	33.3	No	44	97.8
40-49	8	17.8	<i>Academic Attainment</i>		
50-59	5	11.1	Less than High School	10	22.2
<i>Disability Type</i>			High School/G.E.D.	18	40.0
Physical (Mobility)	21	46.7	Some College	6	13.3
Cognitive/Developmental	8	17.8	Technical School	1	2.2
Multiple	7	15.6	Associates Degree	4	8.9
Sensory	6	13.3	Bachelors Degree	5	11.1
Physical (Medical)	2	4.4	Masters Degree	1	2.2
Psychiatric	1	2.2	<i>Previous Employment Experience</i>		
<i>Monthly Income</i>			Yes	38	84.4
\$1000 and under	23	51.1	No	7	15.6
\$1001 – 1500	7	15.6	<i>Current Employment Experience</i>		
\$1501 – 2000	2	4.4	Yes	5	11.1
\$2001 – 2500	1	2.2	No	40	88.9
Missing	12	26.7	<i>Current SSI/SSDI Recipient</i>		
Yes	22	48.9			
No	18	40.0			
Missing	5	11.1			

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