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Creating Economic Opportunity through Work and Support

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In the United States, a significant challenge facing people with physical and intellectual disabilities and workers experiencing chronic health or disabling conditions has been accessing, maintaining, or returning to steady employment. In the 28 years since the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which outlawed workplace discrimination against workers with disabilities, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has been disproportionately high as compared to the general population.

Research on disabilities has long shown that working-age Americans with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than other workers, and they did not share equally in the economic prosperity of the late 1990s and have not in the growing economy of the past decade. In fact, a pervasive gap remains between those with work-limiting disabilities and those without when it comes to household income, employment, and poverty (Erickson, Lee, and von Schrader 2017; Stapleton et al. 2005). Since 2008 when the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics began to generate data on people with disabilities, the employment rate for people with disabilities has generally lagged behind the general population, but it has experienced an unprecedented rise over the past two years (Kessler Foundation and University of New Hampshire 2018). This narrowing employment gap is due in part to the strengthening of the U.S. economy and the tightening labor market, which have generated greater demand for workers.

Since the enactment of the ADA, research has focused on how to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities by:

- reducing dependence on public programs, such as federal and state disability and medical insurance;

- addressing misaligned financial incentives to stay at or return to work;
- improving employment skills and educational attainment;
- addressing significant barriers to employment, including discrimination as well as access to simple services and early interventions such as affordable, accessible transportation and early rehabilitation; and
- overcoming attitudes and stigma toward work and disability by employers, parents, coworkers, insurers, medical personnel, and the social services delivery system.

Fundamentally, these issues are challenging to address because people with disabilities are not a homogenous group. They have a range of disabilities, from those born with or who acquired physical disabilities or disabling conditions due to chronic health conditions at a young age, to individuals of all ages with intellectual and cognitive disabilities such as autism, to those with learning disabilities. As such, a very complex set of issues exists around the intersection of disability, aging, health, and employment, and scalable solutions have not been widely tested or implemented to meet every individual's unique circumstances.

For example, individuals who have had a disability since birth or a young age may be familiar with job accommodation, assistive technology, and other supports, but they may not have acquired or been provided equal access to a high quality education and to the employability skills necessary to get a well-paying, full-time job. Other individuals who acquire a disability later in life, or who experience a chronic medical condition as they age, may have the credentials, experience, and skills to remain working, but they may be unfamiliar with available services and supports to maintain employment or be unable to overcome disability or age discrimination. Still others may be coping with age-related disabilities (such as hearing loss), learning disabilities, or mental health issues and may not identify with having a disability and have little knowledge of resources that could help them keep working (Heidkamp, Mabe, and DeGraaf 2012).

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF PEOPLE FACING SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES TO EMPLOYMENT

While today's public policies and major federal and state benefit systems are still built largely on the premise that people with disabilities cannot work, progress has been made toward changing policies, practices, and attitudes, and recognizing that employment and economic self-sufficiency are important determinants for people with disabilities to achieve both health and well-being.

The three chapters in this section illuminate challenges in addressing disability and employment through the lens of various populations as they make efforts to enter, remain, or return to the labor market. The chapters also offer solutions, involving policy changes, community building, public-private partnerships, and private investments, which have the potential to improve employment opportunities and increase the share of economic prosperity available to people with disabilities across the United States.

In "Empowering Workers with Disabilities: A Philadelphia Story," John Colborn, Stephanie Koch, and Laura Welder focus on how youth with disabilities can achieve greater independence through services and supports tailored to the needs of young adults and their families. Connecting youth to local employment and community-based activities helps foster a strong local network and system of supports key to long-term success. The chapter offers a case study of the Philadelphia Independence Network (PIN), a program of JEVS Human Services designed to help young adults create satisfying lives that include meaningful work, while promoting individual autonomy and independence. A critical component of the PIN model is the unique public-private partnership between JEVS and families of PIN members—JEVS relies on this network of families to support PIN members and help them access employment opportunities.

In "Philanthropy: Building Best Practices in Disability Inclusion" by James Emmett, Meg O'Connell, and Judith M. Smith, the authors discuss the important role of employers in creating a culture of inclusion in the workplace. Companies who support and invest in a culture of inclusion can accrue benefits including better workforce stability and

retention, improved workplace culture and industry image, and better quality relationships with customers and local communities. The authors point out the significant role the philanthropic community has played in initiating and investing in innovative strategies for disability inclusion across corporate America. They also highlight how private foundations, government agencies, nonprofits, and workforce development systems can expand employment opportunities and access to work in the private sector for people with disabilities by working closely with major corporations to increase their disability inclusion efforts.

Finally, in “Reducing Job Loss among Workers with New Health Problems,” Yonatan Ben-Shalom, Jennifer Christian, and David Stapleton focus on the millions of Americans who lose their jobs or leave the workforce, often permanently, because of a medical condition. As they note, “Research indicates that many workers who might otherwise be able to stay in the labor force are losing their jobs and livelihoods today because no one provides the prompt and practical extra support they need. . . . As a result, these workers fall through critical gaps in the social support system, often leading to suboptimal medical and functional outcomes as well as preventable work disability.” The authors demonstrate how early intervention to address common health conditions can prevent both needless work disabilities and the resulting years spent in poverty due to diminishing income and reliance on public benefits. Barriers that stand in the way of reducing work disability include a lack of clear public responsibility for addressing the issue, contradictory incentives to stay at or return to work, and insufficient communication among the medical, insurance, and employment systems designed to protect workers. Various solutions presented, if tested, have the potential to reduce preventable work disability and reliance on federal and state disability benefit systems, and, in turn, increase employment access and retention for workers with disabilities.

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