

Connect-Ability



Creating Systemic Change for the Disabled

In late 2005, the State of Connecticut received a federal grant to identify and remove barriers to employment for residents with disabilities. The grant enabled the creation of an initiative called Connect-Ability. Managed by the Connecticut Department of Social Services and funded by a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Connect-Ability helps people with disabilities find employment information and connect with resources that can get them prepared for the workforce. The initiative has meant that discussions about employment are now part of all efforts to integrate people into their communities. The key is Connect-Ability's comprehensive approach, which includes a technical assistance center that has served more than 1,000 employers and individuals so far.

Progress

Connect-Ability is the state's premier resource center for disability employment information—a single point of entry for employers, employees, and job seekers.¹ It has a track record of close collaboration with employers to remove barriers and ensure an adequate, accessible infrastructure. The Connect to Work Center, a service of the Department of Social Services Bureau of Rehabilitative Services in Hartford, houses Connect-Ability.

How does Connect-Ability work? After a planning session identifies barriers—say, transportation to employment, concerns about disclosing the disability,

a need for special training or for guidance on interviewing and creating resumes—the Center will analyze the problem and develop recommendations. In the process of implementing, monitoring, and evaluating solutions to individual problems, the Connect-Ability program is also creating permanent changes that can benefit others.

Persons with concerns about the effect that work will have on benefits also can access the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) program operated by the Connect to Work Center. Through WIPA, they can request individualized benefits advice. A Community Work Incentives Coordinator (CWIC) explains how they

could manage employment for greater independence without loss of essential benefit supports.

CWICs provide specific information on the incentives available to support people through the transition to work, doing a thorough review of potential benefits and previously untapped services that can help maximize independence. And they offer examples of how others with disabilities have built a financial future, sometimes through a combination of earnings and benefits, sometimes through earnings alone. Follow-up services after clients return to work are also provided.

Ongoing Efforts Needed

Unfortunately, many individuals with disabilities remain unemployed or minimally employed. Although differences in data-collection methodologies currently limit what reporting can be done, the Social Security Administration presents the following picture:

- Some 48,813 Connecticut residents receive Supplemental Security Income benefits because of a disability. Of those, 4,183 (8.6 percent) also earn money through employment. Of the individuals with earnings, 1,410 (33.7 percent) earn in excess of the *substantial gainful activity* (SGA) amount (\$1,000 in 2009, \$1,640 for individuals who are blind). SGA is used to determine initial eligibility for Supplemental Security Income and continuation of benefits for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) when a person returns to work.
- More than 70,000 individuals received SSDI in Connecticut in 2007; of those, 540 (0.8 percent) had benefits withheld because of substantial work activity in a month, and 464 (0.5 percent) had benefits terminated because of a successful return to work.

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Connecticut's Medicaid Buy-in—a medical assistance program for employed persons with disabilities—has a database showing that, with almost 5,000 workers participating, only 15 percent were earning an amount in excess of the 2009 SGA threshold of \$980. The majority of the Medicaid Buy-In participants still rely on other entitlements to supplement their earnings. Clearly, more effort is needed to help individuals with disabilities achieve self-sufficiency.

Connecticut's 2006-2016 plan for jobs—and its newer plan for using stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)—will work to improve workers' skills in technology, boost youth and adult education and training programs, and increase employers' and job seekers' awareness of the state's continuing

job-creation efforts. The 2006-2016 plan focused on sectors deemed most critical to the state's economy: for example, insurance, aerospace, and high-tech engineering (ranging from manufacturing to medical specialties). There was a sense that employment in tourism and recreation could be counted on for the target period and that mathematical, communications, and computer-related businesses also would create significant numbers of jobs. The "green" economy, with its focus on energy efficiency and alternative energy, was on the radar screen then, too.

The plan for using the ARRA reflects strong collaboration among the agencies that support people with disabilities. Several key features include the following:

- The ARRA provides work activities for youth who are disconnected from education and training programs, including youth with disabilities.
- An estimated 40,000 to 45,000 jobs could be added or saved over the next several years. Targeted jobs are middle-skill and may include electrician, automotive mechanic, general maintenance and repair workers, licensed and vocational nurses, and carpenters.
- Service funding will increase for both employers and job seekers. The Connecticut Department of Labor and Connect-Ability are marketing to employers the range of incentives available to those who hire people with disabilities: for example, on-the-job training opportunities and tax credits.
- The state's ARRA plan cites a successful partnership with Walgreens as an example of leveraging business and state agency resources to increase employment and training opportunities for people with disabilities. In the case of Walgreens, a goal of ensuring that people with disabilities make up 30 percent of the company's Connecticut workforce has already been exceeded.

Connect-Ability's new tools and resources for job seekers with disabilities and employers are enabling a more inclusive work environment in Connecticut. The initiative also has disseminated information on new incentives available through the Ticket to Work program for people with disabilities, which was recently redesigned to expand services.²

The redesigned program offers greater flexibility and more choice for persons seeking a

return to work. For example, the program's so-called "early milestones" (part-time work, greater self-sufficiency) allow a mix of benefit payments and earnings in recognition of the incremental nature of the road to self-sufficiency. Ticket to Work's Employment Networks (ENs)—community organizations contracted to provide employment supports and services under the program—now earn milestone payments earlier in the process, more often, and at a higher rate. Additionally, Social Security will pay a State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency and an EN for providing sequential services and ongoing support to beneficiaries. The new rules promote better alignment of the many Social Security work initiatives designed to help those with disabilities.

Finally, there is outreach. Information on the tools and resources available in Connecticut is disseminated through a comprehensive marketing and media campaign focused on stories about real people who hold jobs despite having disabilities. In addition, Connect-Ability hosts an annual employment summit to give positive reinforcement to leading employers for hiring, promoting, and retaining individuals with disabilities.

People with disabilities can and do hold jobs, but everyone has different needs and interests. The Connect-Ability marketing campaign features one person who is deaf and works as a senior systems administrator at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London and another who refused to let being a paraplegic keep him from owning and operating his own trucking company in Guilford. But whatever the disability or the interests, opportunities exist, and Connect-Ability can help people figure out how to make their goals a reality.

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Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/TWWIIA> on the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (TWWIIA), a major federal initiative giving individuals greater access to employment supports and improved work incentives that allow continued access to benefits while employed.

² See the Social Security Administration, <http://www.ssa.gov/work>, and the National Center on Workforce and Disability, <http://www.onestops.info>.