

Moving TANF Recipients with Disabilities to Work: Examples of State Strategies

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This brief examines activities in place to help move recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) who have a disability to employment. It looks at the opportunities and challenges to state governments in crafting supports and services, as well as offers a glimpse of some strategies and approaches being used by state TANF agencies to help recipients with a disability secure and maintain employment.

Introduction

National welfare reform efforts and the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) called upon states to move welfare recipients into welfare-to-work programs. Enacted in 1996, PRWORA replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. In implementing this program, states realigned their welfare and workforce development services to address complex needs of the low-income population, including their barriers to employment.

Although a large number of the adult welfare population subsequently entered employment, some recipients continued to cycle on and off the rolls or to remain on welfare or leave the program without employment, often due to a complex array of barriers that result in their continued joblessness, including but not limited to the presence of a physical or mental impairment.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, a substantially higher proportion (three times the rate) of TANF recipients reported having physical or mental impairments than did adults in the non-welfare population.¹ Other national studies have documented the high proportion of welfare recipients with physical limitations and learning disabilities.² Some studies have reported that as high as one-third of TANF recipients have mental health impairments, most notably depression, generalized anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.³ TANF recipients, and especially those with disabilities, face significant barriers to work. The consequences for TANF recipients living with a disability include a higher likelihood of being sanctioned for non-compliance of TANF work rules,⁴ leaving TANF without working, or losing employment after leaving TANF.⁵ TANF recipients who do not comply with work or certain other requirements may be sanctioned through a reduction or termination of cash benefits. Sanction policies and their severity vary by state. Further information about state policies on sanctioning can be found in the 2008 *Green Book* and in the Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Database.⁶

The Four Purposes of TANF

States can use TANF funds in any manner reasonably calculated to achieve four purposes:

1. Provide assistance to needy families so children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.
2. End the dependence of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage.
3. Prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

With the enactment of TANF, states were afforded flexibility in how they used their block grant funds to move recipients to employment — allowing programs to build in assessment processes and tools that could help program officials identify individuals with disabilities. And with caseload declines, states had both resources and flexibility to provide needed services. TANF rules issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, following reauthorization of TANF by the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act,⁷ created stricter listings of countable work activities and new verification requirements and rules concerning which families must be included in work participation rates. At the same time, there are instances where the regulations sought to expand state flexibility. Changes include, for example:

1. Up to 30% of those meeting federal work requirements may be in vocational educational programs, limited to 12 months in a lifetime per person. (Vocational education is defined in the TANF final regulations as “organized educational programs that are directly related to the preparation of individuals for employment in current or emerging occupations.”⁸ Vocational rehabilitation activities meeting this definition could count as vocational education.)
2. Time spent in a Bachelor’s degree program can count as vocational educational training, subject to the 12-month time limitation.
3. Expanding state flexibility by converting the six-week limit on job search and job readiness assistance to an hourly equivalent.
4. Allowing for a state to exclude a parent who is a recipient of Social Security Disability Insurance benefits from the definition of a work-eligible individual, as is the case with a recipient of Supplemental Security Income.
5. Enhancing state flexibility by allowing a state to account for “excused hours” rather than an “excused day.”

In addition, states may still count work experience, community service, subsidized employment, unsubsidized employment, and other creditable activities as meeting the work requirements. Section III of the TANF final rule, issued February 5, 2008, reminds states that their programs must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Specifically, states must ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to assistance and appropriate employment-related services, and those individuals who need accommodations with respect to the work participation requirements must be given those accommodations.⁹

The TANF Program

The TANF block grant program was established in 1996 as a replacement for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, an entitlement program. Through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Congress established a program of time-limited assistance to eligible families and provided states with a fixed block grant of \$16.5 billion, an amount that has remained in place after a number of program extensions and one reauthorization.

With the block grant structure, states are provided a degree of flexibility in how they set criteria for eligibility, grant amounts to families, sanction policies, and other features of the program. For a more detailed description of various features of each state TANF program, visit the Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Database at <http://anfdata.urban.org/wrd/WRDWelcome.cfm>. Information and data on the TANF program is also available from the Office of Family Assistance within the Administration for Children and Families at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/>.

While states are granted significant flexibility with how they obligate TANF funding within the framework of the four purposes of TANF, states are monitored by the federal government and may be penalized for failure to meet work participation rates. The work participation rate is a metric that represents how many clients on the caseload are engaged in work or work-related activities. All states begin with a target work participation rate of 50% for the entire TANF caseload and 90% for two-parent TANF families.¹⁰ The target is then adjusted downward based on factors such as caseload reduction and excess Maintenance of Effort spending.

Work activities that assist states to meet work participation rates are identified in federal statute and regulation. Work activities that count toward a client's work participation hours include:

1. Unsubsidized employment,
2. Subsidized private-sector employment,
3. Subsidized public-sector employment,
4. Job search and readiness,
5. Community service,
6. Work experience,
7. On-the-job training,
8. Vocational educational training,
9. Caring for a child of a recipient in community service,
10. Job skills training directly related to employment,
11. Education directly related to employment, and
12. Completion of a secondary school program for those without a high school or equivalent degree.

Among these activities, there is a distinction between "core" and "supplemental" (also known as "non-core") activities. For TANF recipients to count toward the federal work participation rate, they must be engaged in a minimum number of hours of "core" activities (required number of core hours for single-parent families or two-parent families can vary depending on whether the family meets certain conditions) and are allowed to use supplemental activities to balance out their average work requirement. Readers should note that the last three items on this list (numbers 10, 11, and 12) are "supplemental" work activities.

State Strategies and Approaches

Over the years, a number of states have taken creative approaches toward improving the employment outcomes of TANF recipients with disabilities. These strategies and approaches generally fall into four categories:¹¹

1. Screening and assessment improvements;
2. Stronger collaboration and partnerships between TANF, vocational rehabilitation, workforce development, and other human service programs;
3. Creating targeted programs and work opportunities; and
4. Providing targeted work supports.

Screening and Assessment Improvements

Workers in TANF offices are often the first contact individuals have when applying for benefits. While recipients may disclose disabilities to frontline welfare workers, not all frontline workers are equipped to appropriately screen and assess whether the recipient has that disability or potentially has other disabilities. Several states have implemented new assessment and screening tools, protocols, and practices to better identify welfare recipients who may have a disability. Some examples include:

The *California* Department of Social Services established a statewide protocol for screening, evaluating, and providing program modifications for recipients with learning disabilities in the state's TANF program (CalWorks). CalWorks caseworkers often conduct an initial screening for learning disabilities during the "appraisal" process. Appraisal, which follows client orientation, is an initial meeting with the client where the caseworker evaluates work history and barriers to employment to assess client readiness to look for work and enter Job Club or Job Search. If a client is unable to obtain employment through the Job Club or Job Search, a more in-depth assessment, including screening for learning disabilities, is conducted to develop a welfare-to-work plan. The client may then participate in work and barrier removal activities per the welfare-to-work plan. Some counties also provide screening to clients that have been sanctioned to help identify issues that hinder the client's ability to participate in required CalWorks activities.

Conducting In-Home Assessments with TANF Recipients: Spotlight on Pennsylvania

The Department of Public Welfare in Pennsylvania has contracted with Public Health Management Corporation and other organizations to run the Maximizing Participation Project (MPP). MPP is an intensive home-based assessment, therapeutic, and vocational program that serves long-term TANF recipients, individuals exempt from TANF due to a verified physical or mental disability,¹² and those who have multiple or undiagnosed barriers to obtaining or maintaining employment that will lead to self-sufficiency.

MPP uses a two-pronged approach that involves comprehensive assessment and intensive one-on-one case management services. Many individuals are seen by MPP's Home Health Assessment staff, and others are seen by outside specialists. For the Home Health Assessment, licensed nurse practitioners and social workers provide in-home physical and behavioral health assessments. This process results in a report that identifies employment barriers such as disabilities, makes recommendations on solutions to overcome barriers, and explores the potential for employment. Following assessment through the Home Health Assessment or outside specialists, MPP case coordinators develop and support individual service plans with clients. Case coordinators meet with clients in their homes on a regular basis to oversee the progress of their service plans, as well as support them in becoming engaged in a vocational activity.¹³

Stronger Collaboration and Partnerships between TANF, Vocational Rehabilitation, Workforce Development, and Other Human Service Programs

Several states have invested in forging strong coordination and collaboration between the various state and federal programs offering benefits and services to welfare recipients and individuals with disabilities entering employment. In many states, collaborations and partnerships are between the state's TANF agency and its vocational rehabilitation agency. In others, collaborations include stronger partnerships with state agencies responsible for workforce development, mental health, substance abuse, child welfare, early childhood and childcare, transportation, housing, veterans affairs, and special education. Organizations that provide communication devices and other assistive technology to individuals with physical disabilities have also been seen to be critical partners. Several states have developed innovative collaborative approaches to identifying and serving TANF recipients with disabilities:

Utah's Choose to Work program is a cooperative service between the Utah State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Department of Workforce Services to provide individualized job development, job placement, and follow-up services to individuals with disabilities, including TANF recipients, who might not otherwise obtain employment without intervention from a job placement specialist. Clients are referred to the program by Department of Workforce Services or Vocational Rehabilitation counselors and must have an employment plan in place. Choose to Work employment specialists are trained in job development techniques for persons with disabilities and work closely with a client and their case manager to provide employment development and placement. Choose to Work service delivery occurs at three levels, all of which may address issues regarding accommodations and often involve close interaction between the state agency and employers:

1. Primary services such as career counseling, job search, and assistance with résumé writing;
2. Expanded services such as on-the-job training, referral to employers, and individually developed jobs; and
3. Follow-up services such as ongoing contact with clients regarding work-related topics and collaboration with clients and employers to facilitate job retention.

Partnering with Workforce Development and Disability Services: Spotlight on Iowa

Iowa developed a collaborative partnership among seven state agencies, known as the Governance Group, to identify and resolve barriers related to employment services for individuals with disabilities. Partners of this multi-agency group include: Department for the Blind; Department of Education; Department of Human Rights, Division of Persons with Disabilities; Department of Human Services; Governor's Developmental Disabilities Council; Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services; and Iowa Workforce Development.

The Governance Group provides oversight to key initiatives that are having an impact on the coordination of employment services.¹⁴ An example is the Disability Initiative, an effort of Iowa Workforce Development and the Department of Human Services to assist TANF recipients with disabilities.

The Disability Initiative created eight disability specialist positions within the PROMISE JOBS program (the state's TANF employment and training program run by the workforce development agency). These specialists are deployed in Workforce Centers in the eight largest population centers of the state. The eight specialists provide extensive case management services to TANF clients with disabilities, and can act in a consulting role with PROMISE JOBS case managers in their regions and throughout the state. They may also work in partnership with vocational rehabilitation counselors and other disability-related agencies on referred participants. The disability specialists are also used as subject-matter experts and assist in improving services for all people with disabilities who are receiving TANF by identifying effective practices that can be replicated by other PROMISE JOBS case managers. This initiative is funded by the Department of Human Services with state TANF maintenance-of-effort funds.

Creating Targeted Programs and Work Opportunities

Moving welfare recipients with disabilities into employment, especially those individuals with limited or no experience in the labor market, can be particularly challenging to individuals under time limits, and to states with federal work participation requirements. Some states have created work programs or strategies for recipients with disabilities that recognize the person's challenges and strengths, and work with them to gain important workplace and job-specific skills as well as work experience. States have also created separate programs with state funding to serve TANF recipients with disabilities, long-term recipients, two-parent families, and others with significant and complex barriers to employment. A number of states have implemented targeted programs and work opportunities:

Minnesota established the Family Stabilization Services (FSS) in 2007 using separate state funding in order to be able to serve Minnesota Family Investment Program (the state's welfare reform program) families with significant employment barriers outside of the federal work participation rate (FSS expenditures do not count toward the state's federal TANF maintenance-of-effort requirements). This approach enables case managers to focus on outcomes, including family stabilization, employment, and greater self-sufficiency. FSS serves families with employment barriers such as mental health problems, physical disabilities, and resident status (residing in the United States 12 months or less), or providing care for a household member with a disability. The FSS approach uses a case management model to serve participants. The case manager and the participant develop a family stabilization plan that identifies the participant's plan for moving toward work and achieving the greatest degree of self-sufficiency. The plan also identifies the range of services, supports, training, and accommodations needed to reduce or overcome employment barriers. The case manager and participant maintain regular monthly contact to assess progress and, if needed, modify the family stabilization plan.

Georgia's GoodWorks: Providing Intensive Services to Promote Employment

GoodWorks is a statewide service strategy developed by the Georgia Department of Labor to help TANF recipients and non-custodial parents become employed and move toward self-sufficiency. GoodWorks provides intensive services to longer-term TANF recipients with multiple barriers to employment, including disabilities and mental health issues. Participants are referred to GoodWorks by the Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services. Intensive services are delivered using a team approach, which includes the state Department of Labor and its career centers and vocational rehabilitation program, workforce development agencies, and other partner agencies such as adult education and mental health. Additionally, clients are assigned to a personal advisor who works with the client to develop an individualized service plan and supports the client through the transition to employment. Components of the intensive service strategy include:

1. Unsubsidized transitional paid job opportunities for clients;
2. Work supports and incentives;
3. Individualized job coaching; and
4. Job retention and career advancement, which include activities such as assistance with childcare, transportation, and other support services.¹⁵

Subsidized Employment for TANF Recipients

Subsidized employment programs have been used since the New Deal to address unemployment among different populations. Subsidized employment can assist those with limited work experience to develop a work history and skills to improve their ability to obtain unsubsidized employment. Subsidized employment can also provide employers an incentive to try out job candidates. Under welfare reform, states and service providers have turned to models such as transitional jobs to provide subsidized employment to targeted welfare recipients. Transitional jobs programs provide temporary, subsidized employment; supportive services; and job placement assistance to individuals who have difficulty getting and retaining jobs. These programs have targeted long-term welfare recipients, ex-offenders, disconnected youth, individuals with disabilities, and others experiencing barriers to employment. Efforts such as the Transitional Work Corporation's (TWC) Philadelphia@Work program are designed to assist TANF recipients to gain skills and experience during a transitional job placement that will lead to permanent, paid employment. TWC has client advocates that help individuals address major employment barriers such as childcare, transportation, and health care needs.¹⁶ TWC, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization, was created in 1998 as a welfare-to-work program for TANF clients. TWC was developed through a collaboration that included city government, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit organization.

Recent research findings are documenting the impact of transitional jobs and other subsidized employment programs. Evaluation findings suggest that transitional jobs programs can provide useful work opportunities for individuals with significant barriers to employment and can have important indirect outcomes such as reduced welfare receipt and reduced recidivism, though improvements could help programs achieve longer-term employment outcomes.¹⁷

Providing Targeted Work Supports

In addition to targeted “to-work” programs, states recognize that individuals with disabilities, including those receiving TANF benefits, may need a variety of other services and supports to help them gain and maintain employment. These supports can include intensive case management, job coaches, supported or customized employment, work accommodations such as the use of assistive technology, and specialized treatment such as substance abuse treatment or mental health counseling. Supports can be provided either while the recipient is receiving welfare benefits, or post-TANF when a recipient is employed. In addition to the examples described above, other examples include:

Massachusetts: The Department of Transitional Assistance has developed a vocational specialist program in 12 of its transitional assistance offices, and plans to expand the program statewide as funding becomes available. Vocational specialists assist TANF recipients with disabilities and other employment barriers who are not meeting work requirements. The vocational specialists evaluate clients’ skills and interests and develop individualized service plans, identify employment barriers and coordinate services to address those barriers, coordinate with employment service providers such as vocational rehabilitation and workforce development centers, and network with community support and employment programs. This networking helps to ensure greater access to needed community services and supports.

Delaware: The TANF program in Delaware has taken steps to identify and address substance abuse and mental health problems among TANF recipients through the Bridge program. This program assists clients that may have problems related to substance abuse, mental health issues, or domestic violence through screening, assessment, and case management services. The primary role of the Bridge program is to assist clients in accessing appropriate treatment services. The Bridge provider develops a plan with each client that identifies the needed services and develops strategies to ensure compliance with treatment recommendations. The Bridge provider may transport clients to appointments and coordinate with the employment and training vendors to ensure that the clients receive credit for their participation in treatment. In their role as case managers and client advocates, the Bridge vendor staff will often assist clients who are facing homelessness or other emergency events resolve these situations.

Through the Bridge program, clients entering employment and training programs are screened for problems related to substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence. Additionally, TANF recipients are referred to the Bridge program if there are suspected problems related to substance abuse or mental health issues. A contracted vendor provides the services offered by the Bridge program. The Bridge vendor is contracted through the Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, which has collaborated with the Division of Social Services to provide the program’s services.

The program was modified in 2008 to make it more accessible to TANF recipients by locating services at Employment Connection sites, which provide services to enable clients to participate in work activities and move into unsubsidized employment. The goal of co-locating the Bridge and Employment Connection vendors is to ensure that case managers from the Bridge program and the Employment Connections vendors engage in ongoing joint case planning and collaboration. This integration of services ensures a long-term focus on self-sufficiency while being responsive to the need for immediate referral and access to treatment services.

Offering an Array of Services to Address Health and Vocational Needs in New York City

The New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) partners with a number of vendors to serve TANF recipients with physical or behavioral health conditions. HRA's Wellness, Comprehensive Assessment, Rehabilitation, and Employment (WeCARE) initiative provides clients with a comprehensive biopsychosocial assessment conducted by a licensed social worker and reviewed by a physician, as well as a full vocational evaluation that identifies each client's strengths, skills, and aptitudes.

WeCARE offers a range of services to help clients achieve their employment goals, including work experience, vocational training, computer skills training, job placement, and post-employment services. Additionally, WeCARE provides a wellness program to address specific health issues that interfere with a client's ability to seek or maintain employment.¹⁸

Conclusion

The examples described in this brief display the depth and breadth of approaches that states have used to engage and help TANF recipients with disabilities to move off public benefits and toward self-sufficiency. Elements common to many of these state approaches include the presence of one or more of the following:

1. A collaborative partnership between a multitude of state agencies, including TANF and other human services agencies, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce development, as well as community-based service providers.
2. Stronger and improved screening and assessment processes focused on identifying whether the TANF recipient has a verified or hidden disability that could affect work participation. Additionally, strength-based assessment methods, including an individualized assessment process and comprehensive case management services, help ascertain employment goals and options, identify needed supports and services, and then develop "to-work" plans.
3. Opportunities for TANF recipients to "try out," train, and adjust to work environments incrementally with the goal of full-time competitive employment.
4. Identifying and providing a range of work services and supports for low-income TANF recipients and other working families that enable TANF recipients to work, such as counseling and case management, or attention to chronic medical problems.

State experiences also suggest lessons and considerations for when reauthorization of the TANF program occurs. The experiences of TANF programs to date suggest the importance of identifying individuals whose disabilities create barriers to employment and maintaining a focus on work as the expected avenue for those individuals to attain economic security. Additionally, welfare reform experience at the state level suggests policy considerations for reauthorization such as:

1. Examining whether modifications to performance measures could better promote engagement and employment for TANF recipients with disabilities (for example, establishing a system of pro-rata credit for hourly participation in allowable work activities);

2. Allowing states greater flexibility to engage clients in job search and job readiness training for up to 12 weeks in any fiscal year;
3. Recognizing the importance of intense, comprehensive individualized assessment in identifying potential barriers to participation in required activities and employment; and
4. Recognizing the role of the TANF program in providing a variety of employment supports and services to recipients and working families with diverse employment barriers by ensuring the adequacy of the TANF block grant to meet current and future needs.

In regard to serving recipients with disabilities through the TANF program, reauthorization creates an opportunity to provide state TANF agencies with stronger incentives to fully engage recipients with significant barriers to employment, including verified disabilities, in activities that promote employment, as well as with greater flexibility to tailor supports and services to an individual's or a family's unique strengths and needs. One such possibility would be to allow states to receive partial credit toward their work participation rates for recipients that complete some of their required hours of work activity. This could provide a positive incentive to engage clients with complex barriers in work activities that move individuals toward employment.

Useful Resources

Organizations that can provide more detailed information on serving TANF recipients with disabilities include:

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. has published extensively on the subject of TANF recipients with disabilities. Visit http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/family_support/tanfdisabilities.asp.

The *U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)* has produced several reports on the topic of serving TANF recipients with disabilities. To access GAO reports, visit <http://www.gao.gov>.

For example:

GAO-03-210, *Former TANF Recipients with Impairments Less Likely to be Employed and More Likely to Receive Federal Supports*, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03210.pdf>.

GAO-02-884, *Outcomes for TANF Recipients with Impairments*, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02884.pdf>.

The *Center for Law and Social Policy* is a national nonprofit that has produced a number of publications on welfare and work supports. Visit http://www.clasp.org/issues?type=temporary_assistance or http://www.clasp.org/issues?type=work_supports.

The *Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor* has many resources on employment of people with disabilities, including the Job Accommodation Network. Visit <http://www.dol.gov/odep/>. Resources on disability and employment are also available from the *U.S. Department of Labor* at <http://disability.workforce3one.org/>.

Endnotes

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7. See http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/law-reg/law_index.html.
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9. Reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, Final Rule, Federal Register, Vol. 73, No. 24, February 5, 2008, retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/law-reg/finalrule/tanf_final_rule.pdf. Also, see Center on Law and Social Policy and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2007). *Implementing the TANF Changes in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005: "Win-Win" Solutions for Families and States, Second Edition*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/publications/tanfguide.pdf>.
10. Minimum requirements for work participation in single- and two-parent categories vary depending on circumstances. For instance, single-parent families with a child under age six are able to meet a lower threshold of average hours of work per week. In the case of two-parent families, there are different participation thresholds for those who receive subsidized childcare versus those who do not. For further information, visit the Office of Family Assistance at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/tanf/index.html>.

11. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (2008). *Assisting TANF Recipients Living with Disabilities to Maintain and Retain Employment*. Princeton, NJ: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/assistingtanf.pdf>.
12. It is important to note that not all TANF recipients are exempt from work participation requirements because of a disability, though in some cases disability may be considered “good cause” for exemption.
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18. Additional information on WeCARE can be found at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/programs/wecare.shtml>.



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About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

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