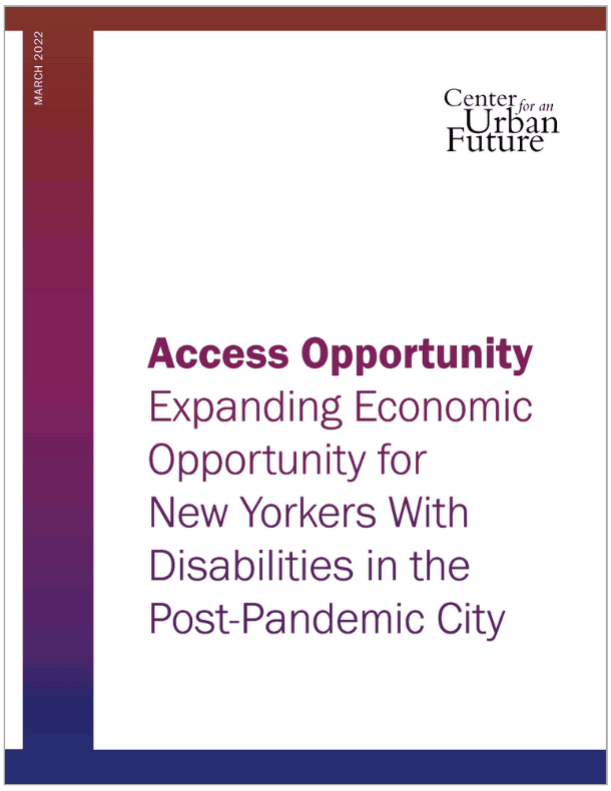

Report - March 2022

Access Opportunity: Expanding Economic Opportunity for New Yorkers With Disabilities

Unemployment and underemployment among people with disabilities long predated but was exacerbated by COVID-19. Policymakers have the opportunity in an economic recovery to make New York City a national leader in employment for people with disabilities.

by Melissa Lent

- The following is the introduction to Access Opportunity: Expanding Economic Opportunity for New Yorkers With Disabilities in the Post-Pandemic City
- Read the full report (PDF)
- View the recommendations from this report

To achieve an equitable recovery for all New Yorkers, city leaders need to confront an economic crisis that long predates COVID-19, while being exacerbated by the pandemic: unemployment and underemployment among people with disabilities. Nearly 1 million New Yorkers are living with a disability, yet in 2021 nearly 17 percent of those of working age with a disability were unemployed—up from 7.4 percent in 2019. This disastrously high unemployment rate has persisted for much of the past two years, even as the unemployment rate for New Yorkers without a disability has fallen sharply since the summer of 2020.

Despite this economic turmoil, enormous shifts in the ways people live and work are creating the conditions for a major expansion of economic opportunity. A cultural shift toward acceptance of remote and hybrid work is creating and accelerating employment potential in thousands of workplaces. Advances in assistive technologies are knocking down entrenched barriers to economic inclusion. A growing number of employers are recognizing that building an accessible workplace can be an important competitive advantage. And a surging number of unfilled job openings is driving some companies to finally reconsider who—and how—they hire.

But realizing these opportunities will only be possible if policymakers seize the moment to make New York City a national

leader in employment for people with disabilities.

To do so, city and state leaders will need to tackle several major challenges. Across the city's workforce development system, leaders report that as many as half or more of their clients have a disability, but that few organizations have the resources to integrate accessibility best practices into their programs and services. Disability-focused service providers have decades of expertise and creative approaches to job development, but inflexible rules and a lack of targeted support have made it nearly impossible to compete for related publicly funded contracts. Meanwhile, job placement rates for clients of the state's Adult Career and Continuing Education Services– Vocational Rehabilitation system—the largest provider of career services for people with disabilities— have fallen to a low of 27 percent. And too few city employers have recognized the value of employing people with disabilities, let alone taken steps to make their workplaces and hiring practices more accessible.

These challenges are compounded by a lack of public investment. City funding for programs serving New Yorkers with intellectual and developmental disabilities has plunged 82 percent over the past two decades, from $70.7 million to $12.6 million. At the same time, new initiatives from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) are succeeding in connecting people to living-wage jobs. But MOPD's annual budget is only $820,000, significantly less than the per capita funding for similar agencies in other cities.

If New York succeeds in both raising the labor force participation rate for people with disabilities to match Seattle's best-in-the-nation 51 percent and lowering the unemployment rate to the citywide average, approximately 72,000 more New Yorkers would be employed annually, earning over $3.4 billion in new wages.[1] Charged with a mandate to rebuild a more equitable post-pandemic city, New York City's leaders cannot afford inaction. This report lays out a strategy for realizing this historic opportunity—and making New York City a national leader in employment for people with disabilities.

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This report—the latest in 25 years of research by the Center for an Urban Future on opportunities to build a more inclusive economy in New York City—provides a detailed look at the potential to expand economic opportunity for New Yorkers with disabilities. The study examines the economic barriers facing this diverse population and shines a light on concrete steps policymakers can take to significantly improve career training and employment outcomes. Made possible by Citi and The Taft Foundation, it was informed by extensive data analysis and interviews with more than 45 New Yorkers with disabilities, leaders of organizations serving people with disabilities, workforce development providers, City University of New York (CUNY) officials, accessibility experts, and key agency officials in government. The report concludes with actionable recommendations for New York City and State policymakers to greatly expand pathways to economic opportunity for people with disabilities.

Providing New Yorkers with disabilities with more and better-quality opportunities to participate, thrive, and advance has enormous untapped potential to grow and reshape the city's economy. Nearly 1 in 9 New Yorkers, roughly 931,000 people, has a self-reported disability.[2] Our research suggests that thousands of these New Yorkers would like to find work and build careers but barriers discourage or prevent them. Expanding access to education, job training, and employment opportunities could add billions of dollars in new wages to the city's labor market—and help New York lead in building a far more inclusive and equitable economy in the wake of the COVID crisis.

"I want to gain more job experience or job skills," says Awan Farrell, a client of Bronx Independent Living Services, a community-based organization that provides education, training, and counseling to New Yorkers with a range of disabilities. "The more work, the more job experience I get. But we need more people to help those who have disabilities. More supports, more help."

Expanding employment access to thousands of New Yorkers like Farrell will require tackling persistent economic disparities.

It will also necessitate a new level of investment and focus from city leaders. In 2019, when the unemployment rate was about 4 percent—the lowest in the 43 years that the data has been tracked—the estimated unemployment rate for New Yorkers with disabilities stood at 12.2 percent.Their median income the same year was $30,544, about $11,000 below the $41,549 median for those without a disability.[4]

The COVID crisis has only widened these disparities. New Yorkers with disabilities have long found lower-wage or part-time work in service industries like restaurants and hotels, in dustries devastated by the pandemic and among the slowest to recover.[5] This has created an especially challenging path back to employment for an already vulnerable population. CUF's report *First Out, Last Back,* published in March 2021, comprehensively documents the severe economic hardships endured by New Yorkers with disabilities due to the pandemic. Direct service providers reported that at least half of their clients with disabilities lost their jobs or were furloughed and remain unemployed, some reporting near-total job losses.[6]

Building these supports is all the more urgent because, while data is limited, evidence suggests that the pandemic may be driving an increase in the number of New Yorkers with a disability, whether from long-term physical effects of COVID-19 or growing mental health challenges. A small piece of data from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) helps illuminate this larger trend: in 2019, 11 percent of active participants in MOPD's programs disclosed a mental health disability; in 2022, it jumped to 28 percent.

Despite these enormous challenges, the pandemic has yielded a broader shift in workforce attitudes and practices that is already spurring change. Remote work accommodations, which disability advocates have long called for, have become normalized. The changes are converging with advances in assistive technology and a record number of unfilled job openings to create conditions that experts say could lead to a new era of employment opportunity for New Yorkers with disabilities, if policymakers act now.

Seizing this opportunity to build accessibility into the city's job training and career development ecosystem, however, will require a new level of commitment from government, philanthropy, and the private sector.

The current scale of government and nonprofit efforts is far eclipsed by the needs of the population they serve. MOPD has made significant progress establishing pathways to living-wage jobs through programs like NYC: ATWORK, which has made more than 500 job placements since 2018, with salaried referrals earning an average of $50,633 annually.[7] But the office is among the smallest in city government and operates with a full-time staff of just five and a budget of $820,000 in the most recent fiscal year—millions less than those for similar agencies in other major cities.[8]

Annual Funding for Mayoral Offices for People With Disabilities, 2021

City	2021-2022 Budget	Budget Per Capita
CITY	2021-2022 BUDGET	BUDGET PER CAPITA
NEW YORK CITY	$820,000	$0.88
WASHINGTON, DC	$2,237,560	$28.69
LOS ANGELES	$4,800,246	$12.09
CHICAGO	$2,473,477	$8.19

Annual Funding for Mayoral Offices for People With Disabilities, 2021		
City	2021-2022 Budget	Budget Per Capita
BOSTON	$623,936	$7.90
HOUSTON	$646,800	$2.80

At the same time, nonprofit organizations dedicated to connecting people with disabilities to the workforce have taken a major financial hit from the pandemic and struggle to access city funding, making it a challenge to scale up successful programs. Promising career training initiatives serve no more than a handful to a few dozen clients annually. For example, the Institute for Career Development (ICD)'s AbilITy Cisco Academy, the first fully accessible computer networking certification program for New Yorkers with disabilities, developed in partnership with MOPD, has the capacity to train just 16 people per cohort, twice annually, but could expand with additional funding.

A key opportunity lies in the mainstream workforce development ecosystem, in large part because these providers are already working with people with disabilities. Several of the city's workforce development organizations report that 50 percent or more of their clients may have a disability, yet few organizations have the training or resources to make their programs fully accessible.

"No community can afford to leave any part of its population behind," says Susanne Bruyère, director of Cornell's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, a research center focused on advancing equal opportunities for all people with disabilities. "It behooves the city to make sure that people with disabilities are part of every workforce development program that we have."

To succeed, policymakers will need to ramp up support to tackle the structural barriers to employment that many New Yorkers with disabilities face and to incentivize building accessibility into New York City's workforce development system.

"We're under-utilizing the talents of New Yorkers with disabilities," says Melinda Mack, executive director of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals, New York's statewide workforce advocacy organization. "And in many ways limiting access to opportunity to pursue not only their dreams, but also jobs that contribute and give back to the community."

Mass acceptance of remote work and training, and advances in assistive technologies, are catalyzing major opportunities. With more support, the impact could expand.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the viability of remote work, and the growing acceptance of such arrangements could open the door for thousands—but only if policymakers, philanthropy, and the private sector seize the moment to harness them.

"One of the ironies of this moment is that a lot of innovations or opportunities that were long advocated for by people with disabilities are now being recognized," says Susan Scheer, former CEO of ICD, a direct service provider for people with disabilities. "Employment makes a difference in people's lives unlike any other policy intervention I've seen. We have a unique opportunity to work together on rebuilding the economy and making sure that equity and inclusion are part of the process from the start."

Experts agree that government leaders, providers, and employers should all consider remote work as an opportunity to tap into talent long left out of certain workplaces. Recent surveys suggest that at least 20 percent of office workers will stay

remote for the long term—up from 5 percent before the pandemic. Further, New York employers offered more than five times as many jobs to remote applicants in November 2021, led by companies in administrative and support services, technology, and finance.[9]

“It’s a good time to re-evaluate the landscape,” says Brett Eisenberg, executive director of Bronx Independent Living Services. “And it’s a good opportunity to get people with disabilities in the door because we’ve all proven that work could be done remotely.”

At the same time, advances in assistive technology are making the future of work far more inclusive. In just the past two years, companies have launched hearing aids boosted by artificial intelligence, apps that use machine learning to improve speech comprehension, and non-invasive neural interfaces that allow people to control machines with electrical impulses.[10] Google’s new TalkBack keyboard integrates braille directly into Android devices, and Apple’s partnership with Tobii Dynavox, an accessible technology organization, has resulted in the first eye-controlled iPad.[11]

Faced with a growing number of unfilled job openings, many more employers could look to New Yorkers with disabilities as a powerful source of talent.

New York City’s battered economy is still more than 400,000 jobs short of its pre-pandemic high, which is contributing to a persistently high unemployment rate of around 9 percent.[12] Despite these challenges, the city is also seeing a surge in hiring, with nearly 450,000 active job postings as of November 2021.[13] The resulting mismatch between supply and demand presents policymakers with an opportunity to help drive better employment outcomes for New Yorkers with disabilities, while ensuring that employers have the workers they need to spur a strong economic recovery.

“Now that we’re through this, on this side of it, and we seem to be moving up, those opportunities will continue to grow,” says John Robinson, CEO of Our Ability, a company that uses artificial intelligence to match people with disabilities to jobs. “The time is now, and not only for professional positions and virtual opportunities. This is also the time to take every help wanted sign out there in a community and engage people with disabilities first.”

Organizations that help connect New Yorkers with disabilities to employment say that, to realize this opportunity, more work will be needed to tackle employer concerns. “There’s a fear,” says Andrea Goodman, former director of the Adaptations Job Program at JCC Manhattan. “People think, ‘Oh, what if we hire someone and it doesn’t work out? Are we the bad guy?’ That gets in the way.”

Research can help address that fear. Companies with demonstrated commitments to disability inclusion outperform peer companies in profit margins and shareholder returns.[14] In addition, employees with disabilities on average record lower turnover rates and higher attendance than their counterparts; further, hiring people with disabilities often carries tax benefits that offsets accommodation costs.[15] In addition, harnessing the opportunities presented by New York City’s current labor market will require significant new efforts to educate employers and market workforce development programs focused on people with disabilities to a broad range of companies with hiring needs.

New Yorkers with disabilities faced major economic challenges and barriers to employment even before COVID.

In 2021, the unemployment rate for New Yorkers with disabilities stood at a startling 16.8 percent, nearly double the rate among those without one. This disparity existed long before the pandemic hit and has been further exacerbated as the unemployment rate for non-disabled New Yorkers has fallen since 2020, even as the unemployment rate for New Yorkers with disabilities reached the highest level in more than a decade.

These disparities are further compounded when considering race, ethnicity, or specific disability. The unemployment rate among Black New Yorkers with a disability in 2019 was 19 percent, versus 11 percent for their white counterparts. Hispanic

New Yorkers with a disability earned just $23,000 in median annual income, their white counterparts $44,000. Among populations with higher needs, such as those with intellectual disabilities or independent living difficulties, the unemployment rate was even higher, at 24 percent and 25 percent, respectively. Just 27 percent of all New Yorkers with a self-reported cognitive disability were in the labor force.[16]

“We really need to present solutions that are going to be reality-informed, and COVID helped us get there where we otherwise would’ve taken a lot longer,” says Diosdado Gica, ICD’s other co-president co-president. ICD’s Joseph McDonald agrees, explaining that the goal is not a return to normal, but rather a new normal. “There’s a lot of new councils and committees and conversations where individuals with disabilities are in some ways for the first time being invited to the table,” says McDonald.

On average, New Yorkers with disabilities work significantly fewer hours and earn less than their counterparts. In 2019, more than 29 percent of employed people with disabilities worked 30 hours a week or less, versus 18 percent of those without disabilities.[17] Evidence also suggests that New Yorkers with disabilities now face a significantly slower economic recovery than their counterparts. The unemployment rate dropped more than 6 percentage points for those without disabilities from the onset of the pandemic through June 2021, but not even one point for those with them.[18]

Several challenges prevent New York City from more fully realizing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

1. Promising government initiatives remain too small—and seriously underfunded.

Multiple city and state government agencies work to provide New Yorkers with disabilities with accessible job training and suitable employment opportunities. Limited investment in many promising initiatives, however—along with a shift of public funding from the city to the state—have slowed progress in closing employment gaps, piloting innovative programs, and expanding access to quality career opportunities.

“The amount of money New York City spends on supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families is a fraction of what it was 20 years ago,” says Marco Damiani, CEO of AHRC New York City, a direct service provider for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

In FY 2002, New York City allocated $46.8 million ($70.7 million after inflation) for contracts to provide services for New Yorkers with intellectual and developmental disabilities.[19] The FY 2022 budget allocates just $12.6 million—an inflation-adjusted 82 percent decline over two decades.[20]

In addition, promising programs at the city level have the potential to scale their impact with significantly more investment. NYC: ATWORK shows what is possible when city government prioritizes boosting employment among New Yorkers with disabilities. The program has made over 500 job placements since its inception, while operating with just five staff and no full-time business developer. NYC: ATWORK has also been able to increase the number of New Yorkers with disabilities employed by the City of New York. Though New York City has long had administered a program, 55-a, designed to expand access to civil service positions for people with disabilities, the city had hired just four employees per year through 55-a in 2016 and 2017. In 2018 and 2019, however, with NYC: AT WORK’s support, 73 were hired.[21]

Given major staffing changes as a new administration takes office, these numbers could increase dramatically in 2022 and beyond. A lack of citywide hiring goals, however, has stymied further progress. The federal government has a 7 percent hiring target for people with disabilities in federal jobs and contracts. New York, however, has no equivalent.[22]

“Everything that MOPD has done has been great,” says Nancy Miller, CEO of VISIONS, an organization providing services to people who are blind or have low vision. “We just need more.”

2. New York State's vocational rehabilitation program falls short of employment benchmarks despite significant federal funding.

The primary vehicle for supporting employment for people with disabilities in New York State, the Adult Career and Continuing Education Services–Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) program, received more than $120 million in state funding, yet its outcomes leave much to be desired.[23]

According to the New York State Rehabilitation Council's annual report, employment outcomes for ACCES-VR have lagged for years and worsened recently. The Council's benchmark is that at least 56 percent of clients find a job. From October 2018 to September 2019, just 39 percent did. The following year, the rate dropped to 27 percent. ACCES-VR is also reaching fewer New Yorkers, from 96,193 in FY 2017 to 91,881 in FY 2019, before plunging by 18 percent to 75,375 in FY 2021.[24] For direct ser vice providers that rely on the ACCES-VR pipeline, this meant far fewer clients and far less funding.

ACCES-VR counselors often manage huge caseloads and significant bureaucratic hurdles, which can lead to long wait times for services and contract approval and wide disparities in the quality of service across the state. ACCES-VR also favors a rapid-attachment style of employment that focuses on entry-level jobs, which may not align with what all jobseekers want.

"The system is entrenched and it needs to change," says John Robinson of Our Ability. "The outcomes they've had have not been strong enough."

3. Government contracts for workforce development programs are not designed to promote accessibility. As a result, few direct service providers can access public funding for job training and career services.

City funding has not kept pace with increasing program costs, extended timelines, and specialized supports needed to help many people with disabilities find work. At the same time, related state funding is tied to a state-controlled client referral system, which means that funding is highly unpredictable.

Providers of employment services for New Yorkers with disabilities report difficulties securing city contracts for workforce programs, often because the contracts do not consider the specific timelines, outcomes metrics, and wraparound supports necessary for the programs to be successful. For instance, AHRC says it has been unable to access any NYC Small Business Services (SBS) or Office of Workforce Development contracts, and only 5 percent of its employment services are city funded. Job Path, a direct service provider for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, also reports that only about 5 percent of its employment services are city funded.

"It's very difficult for providers like us," says Susan Scheer, formerly of ICD, "to access the city workforce development training funds or private philanthropic dollars for workforce development for people with disabilities."

Multiple reasons explain this disconnect. City contracts almost never specify that programs, services, or providers meet accessibility guidelines. Initiatives from the Tech Talent Pipeline to the Summer Youth Employment Program lack language or funding that would open contracts up to disability services organizations. Providers say many of their clients, especially those with higher needs, would benefit from a longer timeline for services than many contracts allow. Placement targets also bar smaller or more specialized providers from accessing funding simply because they are too small. VISIONS reports being often ineligible because it serves too few clients despite a strong track record of successful employment outcomes. Other organizations agree that contracts should allow a more adaptable definition of success that aligns to different disabilities.

"Hold us to outcomes," says Fredda Rosen, executive director of Job Path. "But give us flexibility in a way that we can use our funding so that we can be creative."

4. New York's workforce development community sees the urgent need to integrate accessibility into programs and services, but needs support to do so.

Experts are clear that the city's employment and training infrastructure for New Yorkers with disabilities should not be limited to providers focused on people with disabilities. But few organizations serving the general population have been able to build accessibility into their services or partner with disability-focused organizations.

New York City's mainstream workforce development organizations serve a significant number of clients with disabilities—in some cases, half or more of all program participants. Commonpoint Queens estimates that about 70 to 80 percent of its clients have a disability. In 2019, 50 percent of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow's youth clients at its Sunset Park location had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) indicating a disability. Close to 50 percent of Hot Bread Kitchen job training participants have mental health concerns.

Awareness of this significant percentage has led many organizations to identify the need to embed services for people with disabilities into their organizational structure. But they lack the funding and capacity to hire more staff trained to work with people with disabilities, train on how to provide reasonable accommodations, build partnerships with direct service providers, or form relationships with employers open to hiring more people with disabilities.

"I would love to do more training with my team to be in a better position to support this population, whether we have a program that specifically focuses on [jobseekers with disabilites] or not," says Ronin Davis, senior director of Seedco, a social services and workforce development agency. "But trainings require funding or really good partnerships where people are willing to donate those trainings. It sounds cliché, but funding and capacity are some of the biggest challenges."

5. The threat of losing access to public assistance is a powerful economic disincentive.

One key structural barrier to employment for many New Yorkers with disabilities is the benefits cliff. For those who rely on public assistance programs to help cover basic needs, the threat of losing access to government support discourages them from seeking employment, working additional hours, or amassing even limited savings.

Even a modest boost in hourly wages or weekly earnings could result in the loss of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), childcare benefits, subsidized health care and housing, and other supports—leading to even greater financial precarity.

"For folks that want to try going back to work, but may be hesitant, usually they've had to fight really hard to get SSI [Supplemental Security Income] or SSDI benefits," says Miranda Harms, senior employment advisor at RIT/ NTID Center on Employment and a former member of the New York State Rehabilitation Council. "It's a difficult process. So, when someone finally gets those benefits that they need, it's scary down the road to think about trying work again."

6. A growing number of New York employers are building accessibility into their businesses, but much more support is needed to replicate best practices, especially for small and medium-sized businesses.

Across New York City's fastest growing industries, employers are increasingly approaching disability with an eye to inclusion and accessibility. Since its formation in late 2015, membership in MOPD's Champions of Change Business Development Council has grown to 100. Large companies with a major presence in New York—including Salesforce, Microsoft, EY, and JPMorgan Chase— are integrating accessibility and inclusion by hiring chief accessibility officers, launching neurodiversity-focused hiring initiatives, supporting employee resource groups, and funding on-the-job training with specialized providers. Consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton has established a centralized fund to pay for employee accommodations throughout the organization.

On a smaller scale, East Harlem restaurant Contento, which has two founding partners who use wheelchairs, is demonstrating how to integrate accessibility into the industry. The establishment has embedded accommodations for patrons with disabilities into every element of the restaurant's design, employees receive training on how to work with and serve people with disabilities, and Contento has hired employees with disabilities through partnerships with worforce training organizations.

Nonetheless, awareness of disability across the wider employment and training landscape is lagging.

"I think as a society, we're not in that mindset that within diversity there is disability and within disability is tremendous diversity," says Andrea Goodman, formerly of JCC Manhattan. "Even just starting at a very basic level and helping businesses understand that this is a segment of the population that's really left out, that is very capable, and that there are organizations they can contact to learn more."

Employers also worry about potential liability.[25] Despite years of research establishing the benefits to employers of hiring workers with disabilities, misinformation and discriminatory beliefs persist. For example, more than half of the companies surveyed in one study reported absenteeism or the ability of workers with disabilities to perform their jobs as a concern.[26]

"There's a fear factor. If I hire a person with a disability and they don't work out, I might have to fire a person with a disability," says Paul Feuerstein, CEO of Barrier Free Living, a shelter for survivors of domestic violence with disabilities. "And that's uncomfortable."

7. A new level of commitment to equity and inclusion on the part of government, nonprofit providers, employers, and philanthropy is a major opportunity to make accessibility a cornerstone of the city's economy and address persistent employment and income disparities.

New York can draw on several successful local, state, and national workforce initiatives to boost employment for New Yorkers with disabilities. Project Search in Ohio works with young adults with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities to provide direct skills-building in the workplace and job connections to nontraditional jobs in hospitals and other businesses. Its internship-to-employment model has been replicated across the country and it saw almost 80 percent of its 2017–2018 cohort secure employment.[27] A growing body of evidence indicates that a supportive employment model known as Individual Placement and Support can lead tbetter employment outcomes for clients with disabilities and has been implemented successfully in Los Angeles (CalWORKs) and Minnesota (Families Achieving Success Today).[28]

The Empowered Cities initiative, spearheaded by the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, is helping spark new municipal efforts to advance economic opportunities for people with disabilities, including: expanding financial education and access to banking services; boosting access to computers and broadband; increasing summer internship opportunities for young people with disabilities; and helping key opportunity institutions such as public libraries equip their computer labs with assistive technology.[29]

Now it is up to Mayor Adams and policymakers across city and state government to seize the moment and ensure that people with disabilities are not left out of the city's recovery. To do so, Mayor Adams and the City Council should launch what

would be the nation's first Accessibility Training Challenge, a $10 million competitive grant program designed to enable workforce organizations and disability services providers to partner on integrating accessibility throughout existing programs. City and state officials can make further progress by establishing a 7 percent hiring target for people with disabilities in city jobs and contracts; holding agencies accountable for meeting 55-a hiring goals; directing city and state workforce agencies to launch requests for proposals (RFPs) focused on evidence-based employment programs for people with disabilities; scaling up NYC: ATWORK with a $2.5 million investment to expand its staff and impact; and launching a public-private partnership to provide grants, low-cost loans, and technical assistance for small- and medium-sized businesses to provide accommodations to employees with disabilities.

Governor Hochul and the state legislature should jumpstart progress by focusing on reforms to ACCES-VR designed to add counselors, reduce caseloads, share and implement evidence-based best practices, and incentivize partnerships between economic and workforce development organizations and disability-focused organizations. The state should also alleviate the benefits cliff by encouraging increased earnings and allowing more savings while maintaining eligibility for these crucial supports.

New York has the opportunity to emerge from the current economic downturn as a beacon of accessibility, leading the country in disability inclusion. With the right strategies and investments, policymakers can amplify the work of advocates and practitioners, tackle the persistent unemployment and underemployment crisis facing too many of those with disabilities, and bring thousands more talented people into the workforce, setting far more New Yorkers on the path to meaningful work and financial independence.

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10 Ideas for Strengthening New York City as a Leader in Employment for People With Disabilities

Almost one million New Yorkers across a range of disabilities have a unique potential to harness immense economic opportunity in an equitable recovery. With a new mayoral administration, New York City has the chance to become a national leader in inclusivity for people with disabilities in the workplace. This population and its advocates face structural and pandemic-based challenges, such as the benefits cliff, no clear diversity initiatives, a shortage of funding, and a lack of awareness on disability issues.

Enormous shifts in the ways New Yorkers live, work, and train for employment—coupled with accelerating advances in technology—have created the conditions for a new era of employment accessibility. If city leaders meet the challenge of lowering the unemployment rate for working-age New Yorkers with disabilities and boosting labor force participation, the more than $3.4 billion in additional wages generated annually would have ripple effects in every community across the five boroughs.

With adequate funding, high-level leadership, and targeted policy interventions, city and state government can strengthen and restructure the existing system of training structures and foster a more equitable labor market in which people with disabilities can better access quality employment opportunities and outcomes. To make this vision a reality, city and state officials should consider the following recommendations.

1. **Launch a $10 million accessibility training challenge grant for city workforce development organizations to build accessibility for people with disabilities into their services.** Even though 50 percent or more of the clients at many workforce development organizations may have a disability, most of these organizations do not have the specialized knowledge and resources to optimize their services for a range of disabilities. Integrating disability employment services into the wider workforce landscape could move thousands more New Yorkers with disabilities into employment. The city should make a

major $10 million investment in 2022 that workforce development organizations can use to start disability-specific initiatives. This funding should include partnerships with direct service providers and NYC: ATWORK to serve as resources. Interviews with almost a dozen of these community-based organizations revealed two main areas for funding: awareness training and dedicated staff. General workforce organizations should strive to embed vocational rehabilitation counselors in their own services so they can screen clients and create plans for inclusivity.

2. **Scale up the government programs that are working, such as NYC: ATWORK and EmpoweredNYC.** Since 2018, the NYC: ATWORK program, which provides employment services to people with disabilities, has connected 500 workers to jobs, earning an annual salary averaging about $51,000.[1] These outcomes are all the more impressive because investment has been minimal. A new investment of approximately $2.5 million could supercharge NYC: AT WORK by expanding business development capacity, sparking new career training programs like the IT Academy, and tripling the number of New Yorkers served annually. The 2019 EmpoweredNYC pilot also proved successful, with 667 New Yorkers participating in more than 1,100 financial counseling sessions.[2] As of December 2021, the nascent program has helped more than 1,000 participants.[3] Scaling up EmpoweredNYC could also expand access to benefits counseling, increasing uptake for current government programs, reducing fear about the benefits cliff for people with disabilities, and supporting better outcomes for New Yorkers pursuing education and job training.
3. **Establish a 7 percent hiring target for people with disabilities in city jobs and city contracts and measure progress on 55-a hiring across government.** By leveraging its purchasing power and requiring a certain percentage of jobs in city government or paid for through city contracts to be held by people with disabilities, government can incentivize a significant expansion of inclusive workplaces and boost the visibility of workers with disabilities. In its recent review of the federal hiring target, the U.S. Department of Labor found that a majority of the contractors who measured the target by job group met or exceeded the goal in at least one category.[4] In addition to setting this goal across government, the city should commit to filling all 55-a slots in civil service roles and make this data public for every agency.
4. **Launch mobile small business accessibility teams to help make 2,500 small- and medium-sized business workplaces accessible to employees with disabilities by 2025.** To combat harmful misinformation and market the array of programs and incentives that are available for employers of disabled people, Mayor Adams should direct the Department of Small Business Services to work with MOPD to launch five mobile Small Business Accessibility Teams charged with helping make 2,500 small- and medium-sized business workplaces accessible to employees with disabilities by 2025.These teams would go door to door and hold virtual training sessions across all five boroughs, helping businesses understand the benefits of hiring disabled workers, the supports available to provide accommodations, and the providers that exist to help source talent, and make connections to other business owners who have made accessibility a priority and can share their experiences and the benefits. The mayor can also embed satellite teams into the city's Workforce1 Centers to help clients with disabilities navigate training and employment options while coaching center staff on disability etiquette, best practices, and reasonable accomodations.
5. **Create a $1 milllion workplace access fund, seeded with public and private dollars, to support the rapid deployment of accommodations in businesses across New York City.** Consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton has established a centralized fund to cover employee accommodations across the organization—a best practice that other major firms have begun to adopt. For most small businesses—the majority of firms in New York City—these costs are a significant barrier. New York City can address the situation by working with private-sector partners and philanthropy to seed a Workplace Access Fund, which would provide grants to small businesses to implement workplace accommodations. Whether a screen reader, a translator, or a job coach, reasonable accommodations can boost job performance for people with disabilities and open new employment opportunities in small businesses across the city. In addition to starting this fund, New York City can take the lead and launch a similar, internal fund to enable all city agencies to accommodate its hires with disabilities regardless of the agency's financial

needs.

6. **New York State should reform ACCES-VR to place more people with disabilities in quality jobs—and elmininate the benefits cliff.** ACCES-VR is the primary state vehicle for employment services for people with disabilities. But caseloads have become unmanageable and employment outcomes have been subpar.[5] The next governor and state legislature should reform ACCES-VR so that it can perform at its fullest potential and place thousands of more New Yorkers into jobs. Rather than incentivizing a rapid-attachment model of employment, the state could mandate different benchmarks based on the intensity of training and education offered and the ability to foster collaboration among provider organizations that meet longer-term employment goals. The state should also direct funding to incentivize innovation through stronger industry partnerships, such as creation of career training pathways in technology, education, creative industries, the care economy, and the emerging green economy. The state could also embed ACCES-VR counselors in high-performing general workforce development organizations and double the number of ACCES-VR counselors to help reduce caseloads and improve response times. In addition to these changes to ACCES-VR, Governor Hochul and the State Legislature should work together on legislation to alleviate the benefits cliff by encouraging increased earnings and allowing more savings while maintaining eligibility for these crucial supports, including initiating a program that covers benefits for working people with disabilities. The governor may look to Massachusetts' MassHealth CommonHealth program as a model for expanding healthcare coverage for people with disabilities whose income exceeds the cut-off level.[6]
7. **Issue flexible workforce development contracts that incorporate accessibility goals and expand city workforce funding to more disability-serving organizations.** New York City's publicly funded workforce development contracts have historically locked out providers that serve people with disabilities due to a lack of focus on accessibility as a criterion, inflexible rules around reimbursement rates, and insufficient funding for needed supports. To address this inequity, the mayor should direct each agency responsible for issuing workforce development contracts to integrate accessibility goals into future contracts and develop new RFPs specifically focused on serving New Yorkers with disabilities. To help facilitate these changes, City Hall should consider hiring a Senior Advisor for Workforce Accessibility on the team of the Deputy Mayor for Economic and Workforce Development, responsible for ensuring that economic and workforce development initiatives includes clear accessibility goals and metrics.
8. **Launch a campaign to develop internship and apprenticeship opportunities accessible to New Yorkers with disabilities.** Misunderstandings among employers about job performance and costs when hiring people with disabilities are deep rooted. An effective strategy to address this situation is to expose employers to people with disabilities in the workplace through internships and apprenticeships. A 2014 study surveying 675 human resource professionals found that internships made it almost six times more likely that a person with a disability would be hired.[7] But to date there has been no coordinated citywide effort to promote and expand the number of work-based learning opportunities accessible to New Yorkers with disabilities. The mayor and City Council should work together to create a new Accessible NYC internship campaign, recruiting partners across the private sector and in each government agency. Internships and apprenticeships can give people with disabilities real-world experience they can use for future work opportunities; meanwhile, employers can fully understand the diversity and talent New Yorkers with disabilities have to offer. New York should lead the way by identifying at least 500 companies that offer paid work-based learning opportunities that are accessible to New Yorkers with disabilities and set a goal of connecting 5,000 New Yorkers with disabilities annually with paid work-based learning opportunities.
9. **Embrace remote work while allocating new resources to close the digital divide.** Disability advocates have long called for remote work options for certain people with disabilities, and the pandemic has proved that this modality is possible at a large scale. But our data analysis reveals a 20 percentage point divide in household computer access between New Yorkers with disabilities and those without one.[8] Although the city should continue to embrace remote work as an inclusive option for many New Yorkers, for remote work opportunities to be reach all New Yorkers with disabilities, the city first needs to make further

progress in closing the digital divide. This should include a significant new investment focused on expanding digital equity for New Yorkers with disabilities, including assistive technology, broadband access, Internet-enabled devices, and digital skills training on how to use devices and digital programs.

10. **Build a central directory of career services providers for people with disabilities, their employers, and the organizations that serve them.** Direct service providers for people with disabilities have the expertise in working with people across a range of disabilities, yet many workforce organizations and small business assistance organizations express the need for better visibility into potential partners with this specific expertise. One of the simplest and most effective ways to raise awareness about these programs is to create a centralized directory of service providers. This directory should be accessible across a range of disabilities and include information on training programs for provider organizations and employers as well as for jobseekers. General workforce organizations could use this directory to gain insight into potential training partners, and employers who seek to build inclusive workplaces can also locate workforce providers who can help them source talent for open jobs.

Endnotes

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