



WORKING WITH DISABILITY: Toward a truly inclusive Vermont labor force



VCIL

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Introduction

Even before COVID-19, Vermont's labor force was shrinking. But there is a group of Vermonters who can and want to work and who can help the economy recover from COVID-19. These are the 44,000 working-age residents with disabilities.¹ Only about half of them are working.

And half still are not. That's because barriers remain, including physical inaccessibility; obstacles to the use of assistive software; employers' misperceptions of the costs of accommodations; limited access to education and training; and the loss of needed assistance when higher earnings trigger ineligibility for public benefits.

For Vermonters of color with disabilities, opportunities are additionally limited by systemic racism.

People with disabilities have fought for rights and access in employment—and won a lot. The federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 outlawed discrimination based on disability in jobs supported by federal dollars. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act expanded that prohibition to all workplaces and required

employers to make “reasonable accommodations” for employees with disabilities. While federal law banned discrimination in hiring, ending discrimination requires more than legislation. It requires challenging stigma and increasing people's understanding of disability.

Prohibiting discrimination and diminishing stigma are not the same as maximizing inclusion. Vermont has led the states in enacting policies to advance employment equity for people with disabilities. Yet several things still must improve. People with disabilities need:

1. The ability to meet basic needs, including housing, health care, and nutrition.
2. Opportunities for training and education, especially post-secondary education.
3. Physical and technological access to the workplace and inclusive, respectful workplace cultures.

People can be born with disabilities or acquire them later in life. Disability can be the result of trauma, exposure to environmental toxins (more likely for people in poverty), or an accident. A disability can be

a visual or hearing impairment; it can be a developmental, physical, or mental health issue. Regardless of any individual's disability, employment policies must enable everyone who wants to work to find suitable employment and thrive in the workplace.

All Vermonters benefit from a more inclusive labor force. People with disabilities increase their incomes, which improves their quality of life. More income increases state tax revenues and is good for local businesses. Accommodative design and technology make workplaces more accessible and comfortable for all employees.

Connecting more people to meaningful work allows talents and energies to be shared and community connections to grow. Fully including people with disabilities in the labor force moves Vermont closer to being a state that works for all and where all can work productively.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)

The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the workplace, schools, transportation, telecommunications, and all spaces open to the general public. The ADA requires employers with 15 or more employees to provide “reasonable accommodations” to qualified applicants or employees so they can do their jobs. It also established enforceable design guidelines to ensure access to the built environment.

'Human again' a story of Dean Marchand, restaurant cook, Bennington

Even though I’m not working nowheres near like what I did, going back to work, it made me feel human again, like I was contributing. I can’t even describe how much it did for my self-worth. And there’s a depression side of that. I was bad for a while. So [working] helped me be better for the people around me as well. I can’t put a premium on that.

Vermonters with Disabilities are Working

People with disabilities are an important part of Vermont’s labor force. They work in all industries and occupations, at all wage levels, as janitors, cashiers, engineers, and lawyers.

Vermonters with disabilities, 2018

Total	93,688
Male	50.10%
Female	49.90%
Under 18	7.80%
18-64	50.20%
65+	42.10%
White	94.30%
Black	0.80%
Native American	1.10%
Asian	1.00%
Other races i	2.80%

Type of disability ii	Percentage
Hearing	31.80%
Vision	15.90%
Cognitive	39.30%
Ambulatory	46.80%
Self-care	20.10%
Independent living iii	35.60%

Total working-age (18-64)	43,895
Married	40.70%
Living alone	21.30%
Living w/ minor children	21.60%
Homeowners	60.70%

i The numbers of Vermonters of color with disabilities are small, so they have large margins of error.

ii A person can have more than one type of disability, so the total exceeds 100 percent.

iii Difficulty doing errands alone (does not apply to those under 18).

That wasn't always the case. Prior to 2002, Vermont, like other states, had segregated workspaces called sheltered workshops for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Vermont was the first state to close these—and eliminate the (still federally legal) “subminimum” wages they paid. Increased state investment in supported employment² for Vermonters with intellectual and developmental disabilities brought them into integrated spaces with wages comparable to their co-workers’.

By 2018, Census data show that nearly 22,000 Vermonters with disabilities ages 18 to 64 had worked at some time during the previous 12 months. This was about half of working-age Vermonters with disabilities and 7 percent of all employed Vermonters in that age range.

Workers with disabilities were equally split between full time and part time in 2018.³ People with hearing and vision challenges were most likely to work full time, while people with difficulties in self-care (bathing or dressing) and independent living (e.g., doing errands alone) were the least.

Half of working-age Vermonters with disabilities worked.

People with a disability, 18-64, by work status, 2018.

Work Status	People with a disability, 18-64 years old	Percent
Didn't work	21,992	50%
Worked part-time	10,702	24%
Worked full-time	11,201	26%

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](https://www.ipumus.org), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

But when employment is a level playing field, people with disabilities achieve success comparable to workers without them. Those who worked full time earned about the same as full-time workers without disabilities. And, as in the broader workforce, Vermonters with disabilities who have more education were more likely to work. More than two-thirds of Vermonters with disabilities with bachelor's degrees worked, while only half of those with high school diplomas did. But just 16 percent of Vermonters with disabilities had bachelor's degrees, compared with 36 percent of those without disabilities.

Full-time workers with and without disabilities earned similar amounts. Median wage and salary income for full-time Vermont workers, 18-64, by disability status, 2018.

Work Status	With disability	No disability
Full-time	\$41,895	\$44,435

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](https://www.ipumus.org), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

Education narrowed the working gap for Vermonters with disabilities.

Share of Vermonters working, 18-64, by select education levels and disability status, 2018.

Education Level	With disability	Without disability
High school graduate	49.9%	86.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	70.0%	92.7%

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](https://www.ipumus.org), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

Technologies including screen readers, assistive communication devices, speech recognition software, and adaptive switches have helped workers with disabilities go to school and do their jobs. With the right supports and access to more education, people with disabilities can work in more types of jobs and earn better wages.

Winnie Looby, lecturer and coordinator, Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, University of Vermont

We need more people with disabilities working in classrooms so that kids with disabilities can have role models to visualize themselves as adults doing something that they really like.

'Rock stars' a story by Jen Kimmich founder and CEO, The Alchemist brewery, Stowe

A lot of the conventional wisdom about business tells us to hire rock stars, that superstar high performers will supercharge your business. I think it's time for people to change their definition of rock stars. People who show up with joy, with a positive attitude, who overcome barriers and work despite challenges and difficulties that their colleagues don't even know about — they are the rock stars.

Challenges and Barriers Remain

Vermont workers with disabilities have come a long way in the past 50 years. But they still face roadblocks to full access and equity, and too many who want to work are not working.

Of people with disabilities ages 18 to 64, about half—22,000—did not work in 2018, compared with 11 percent of people without disabilities. Women were less likely to work than men, and those who worked were less likely to work full time. At every education level, people with disabilities were less likely to work than those without them.

People with disabilities did not stay out of the workforce because they lacked interest. What's lacking instead are universally designed systems that provide access to print materials, websites, software, and plain language instructions; transportation; remote working options and flexible scheduling; support staff; and education. Misperceptions, conscious or not, about people's capabilities also keep them out of the workforce.

Some policies are also out of sync with full workplace inclusion. People risk losing essential assistance, such as health insurance, if they reach a certain income or level of savings. For people with disabilities, who often have chronic and severe health care needs, losing health insurance has immediate negative repercussions.

For those who do work, inequities persist. In 2018, workers with disabilities were more concentrated at the lower end of the wage scale than people without disabilities. And while a typical full-time worker earns about the same whether disabled or not, women with disabilities working full time earned 11 percent less

than men with disabilities and 8 percent less than women without disabilities. Meanwhile, part-time workers with disabilities earned only half as much as their counterparts without disabilities—just over \$6,500 a year in 2018. That's both because they worked fewer hours—possibly to avoid losing benefits—and earned lower hourly wages.

Vermont workers with disabilities were more likely to hold lower-paying jobs.

Share of workers, by wage level and disability status, 2018*.

Wage level	With a disability	No disability
Bottom third	38.4%	24.5%
Middle Third	35.8%	33.5%
Top third	25.8%	42.0%

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](https://www.ipums.org/), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

*To compare the relative wage levels of jobs held by people with disabilities and those without, we ranked median hourly wages for more than 280,000 jobs from the 2018 Occupational Employment Statistics for Vermont, divided them into three equal-size groups, and gave them relative labels: bottom, middle, and top. From Census data we obtained the occupations of working Vermonters ages 18 to 64, with and without a disability, and determined their distribution among the three wage categories. The bottom third goes up to \$15.72 per hour and the middle third to \$23.43.

Women with disabilities earned the least.

Median wage and salary earnings for full-time Vermont workers, by sex and disability status, 2018.

Gender	No disability	Disability
Male	\$ 47,609	\$ 43,035
Female	\$ 41,895	\$ 38,510

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](https://www.ipums.org/), www.ipums.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

Most accommodations cost nothing, a story by Zak Schmoll, senior insurance underwriter New England Excess Exchange, Orange

The company was very accommodating right from the beginning, just like, 'OK, how tall does your desk need to be? How much room do you need to turn around?' We have cubicles and that can be a little difficult with a wheelchair, especially mine, because I'm partially reclined in my chair. It takes up a lot of space. But they were very like, 'OK, well, here's the space, does it work, what do you need moved, how do you need it changed?'

A More Inclusive Workforce Benefits All Vermonters

Providing people with disabilities greater access to work benefits them, other workers, employers, and the state.

Vermonters with disabilities are more likely than those without to experience poverty. But other factors also affect economic status—and a major factor is race. A national study found that Black Americans with disabilities are twice as likely to experience poverty as Black Americans without disabilities, and at a rate 10 points higher than all Americans with disabilities.⁴ Employment reduces the likelihood of poverty by more than half for people with disabilities—and the 42,000 family members they live with. The more people earn, the more they spend and pay in taxes. That's good for Vermont's economy.

Poverty rates were higher for people with disabilities, working or not.

Percent of working-age Vermonters in poverty, by work and disability status, 2018.

Poverty Rate	With Disability	No Disability
Not working	32.8%	28.3%
Working	13.7%	6.4%

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](#), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

Over 86,000 could benefit directly from improved opportunities for Vermonters with disabilities.

Vermonters with disabilities, 18-64, and family members in their households, 2018.

Category	Population
Working-age people with disabilities	43,895
Additional family members	42,267

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](#), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute.

Increasing work opportunities for people with disabilities would give employers a bigger labor pool. Vermont's labor force shrank by 11,000 people from 2010 through 2018; it is expected to lose 14,000 more by 2030. If people with disabilities participated in the labor force at the same rate as those without them, there would be 17,000 additional workers—enough to replace many of those who are gone.

Workers with disabilities could help replenish Vermont's labor force.

Actual + projected, 2010-2030	25,000 workers lost
Available working with disabilities, 2018	17,000

Data source: [IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota](#), www.ipumus.org, 2014-2018 5-yr. samples ©2020 Public Assets Institute

But the benefits are not just economic. Employment improves health,⁵ alleviates social isolation, and increases overall life satisfaction and civic engagement for people with disabilities.⁶

Workplace adaptations for an employee with disabilities usually don't cut into the bottom line, as some employers fear. According to a 2019 report, over half—58 percent— of accommodations cost nothing; for the rest, a typical price tag was \$500.⁷ If accessibility is built into the workplace at the outset, fewer accommodations are needed. And universal design and assistive technologies, such as handrails, automatic doors, closed captioning, and speech recognition software, make the workplace more accessible and comfortable for everyone. For Vermont's aging workforce, that's a plus. Finally, the COVID pandemic has forced thousands to work remotely, challenging many to make home "offices" that are ergonomic and efficient. By necessity, people with disabilities have found ingenious solutions to many of these problems. All Vermont employers and workers have a lot to learn from them.

What Vermont is Doing—and What Needs to be Done

A half-century of federal civil rights legislation—won by a courageous, persistent, and strategic socialjustice movement—has made huge differences in the lives of people with disabilities. Vermont has been a leader

in enacting progressive policies, with advocates and policymakers co-creating innovative public and private programs providing access to basic needs, education and training, and the workplace.

For instance, Linking Learning to Careers, a pilot program of Vermont's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, boosts career and college readiness for high school students with disabilities. Think College, launched in 2011 at the University of Vermont, provides a two-year vocational program for students with disabilities in a college environment. And Project SEARCH pilot programs connect students with developmental disabilities with internships at larger organizations, where they learn skills in multiple departments.

To ensure that employment does not conflict with basic needs, the Vermont Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Savings program allows some Vermonters with disabilities to save money without jeopardizing needed public benefits. Vermont has one of the nation's highest per-capita uses of such accounts, thanks to early implementation, in 2017, and targeted outreach by state and public organizations.

But there is more to do. Many Vermonters with disabilities who want to work are still not working. Many workplaces lack either physical or technological accessibility, and many employers may be unaware of the options for hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities.

The policies and programs that provide access to basic needs, education and training, and workplaces must be maintained, enforced, and expanded in order for people with disabilities to fully participate in the economy. Some recommendations for improvements are:

1. Access to basic needs.

- Ensure financial support is adequate to keep people with disabilities out of poverty.
- Protect and expand quality, accessible health care coverage.
- Eliminate benefits cliffs⁸ that discourage work.

2. Access to education and training.

- Require that high school students with disabilities have equal access to post-secondary preparation.
- Ensure that programs for youth with disabilities transitioning to adulthood have sufficient funding.
- Implement strategies to increase students with disabilities' access to and completion of college.
- Promote access to post-secondary training programs and registered apprenticeship programs that lead to high wage careers for people with disabilities.

3. Access to the workplace.

- Increase employers' awareness of the opportunities for and value of hiring people with disabilities.
- Encourage private employers to provide accessible printed materials, websites, and other technology.
- Ensure that software systems are accessible, based on the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#).
- Improve public infrastructure, including transportation and broadband access.
- Ensure all state-funded programs promote and support work for people with disabilities.

Laws and policies improve lives materially and, once in practice, can change hearts and minds. But social change takes more than laws on the books. Vermonters generally, and employers in particular, need to understand how people with disabilities are marginalized—and how that is compounded by discrimination based on sex, gender, race, and ethnicity. They need to be more aware of the important roles people with disabilities play in our communities and workplaces, and what it will take for society to be fully inclusive. Vermont should be a state where all people can work with dignity, security, and meaning and without frustration, fear, or discrimination. Every Vermonter, not just those with disabilities, will reap the rewards.

Resources

For the community, employers, and job seekers.

[Disability Rights Vermont](#)

[Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities](#)

[Green Mountain Self Advocates](#)

[University of Vermont Center on Disability and Community Inclusion](#)

[Vermont Center for Independent Living](#)

[Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights](#)

[Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council](#)

[Vermont Developmental Disabilities Services Division](#)

[Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#)

[Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

[Vermont Psychiatric Survivors](#)

[Vermont Statewide Independent Living Council](#)

Hearing a Student's Voice

Scene: Transfer student interview, Mount Anthony Union High School, Bennington. Guidance counselor Eric Caron's co-worker finishes her questions and schedules the student for basic courses.

Eric (to student): You talked about biology, and it sounds like that was a pretty advanced course.

Student: Yes, it was honors biology. Eric: Why biology?

Student: Oh, I want to be a medical examiner. Eric: Have you read books about that?

Student: Yeah, I read these books.

Co-worker reschedules student with honors and AP courses. Student leaves.

Co-worker: Thank God you were here, Eric. I took one look at her with the piercings and the tattoos, and I just didn't hear what she was actually saying.

Eric (remembering, after retirement): I listened, as a blind person, and heard who the student was and wasn't distracted by any visual judgments.

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And a final thank you to all of the advocates and activists who have worked so tirelessly in Vermont, nationally, and globally toward creating a more inclusive workplace and community for people with disabilities.

Endnotes

1 Data for this report come from the U.S. Census Microdata from the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS provides the most detailed source of employment information about Vermonters with disabilities. Although this is not the only way to define disability, the ACS includes anyone who identifies as having a “serious difficulty” with at least one of the four basic areas of functioning: hearing, vision, cognition, or walking or climbing stairs; or with at least one of two activities of daily living: bathing and dressing, or difficulty performing errands. The data do not differentiate a physical disability from a psychiatric disability.

The 44,000 people noted here comprise working-age Vermonters (18-64) with disabilities who are not living in group quarters. Group quarters include institutions, such as correctional facilities and nursing homes, and non-institutional group quarters, such as college dormitories and military barracks. There are approximately 3,000 Vermonters with disabilities ages 18-64 living in group quarters.

The ACS has been criticized as undercounting people with disabilities: It estimated that 16 percent of Vermonters over the age of 18 had a disability in 2018, compared with the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey, which estimated 24 percent. Research has also shown that the ACS undercounts the number of people receiving Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income–Disability Income. Burkhauser, R., Fisher, T., Houtenville, A., and J. Tennant (2012), “Using the 2019 CPS-ASEC-SSA Matched Dataset to Show Who Is and Is Not Captured in the Official Six-Question Sequence on Disability,” 14th Annual Joint Conference of the Retirement Research Center Consortium. Retrieved June 3, 2020 from <https://www.nber.org/programs/ag/rrc/rrc2012/papers/4.3%20Burkhauser%20Fisher%20Houtenville.pdf>.

2 Individual support services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, enabling them to access and succeed in competitive employment. This includes person-centered planning, meaningful job matches, and creative strategies to broaden employment opportunities.

3 The definition of full-time work is 35 hours or more per week for 50 to 52 weeks in the year. Part time is anything less.

4 [National Disability Institute, “Financial Inequality: Race, Disability and Poverty in America,”](https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf) Feb. 8, 2017. Retrieved July 23, 2020 from <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf>.

5 [Lead Center, “The Impact of Employment on the Health Status and Health Care Costs of Working-age People with Disabilities,”](http://www.leadcenter.org/system/files/resource/downloadable_version/impact_of_employment_health_status_health_care_costs_0.pdf) November 2015. Retrieved August 14, 2020 from http://www.leadcenter.org/system/files/resource/downloadable_version/impact_of_employment_health_status_health_care_costs_0.pdf.

6 [Schur, L. \(2002\), “The Difference a Job Makes: the Effects of Employment among People with Disabilities,”](https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2002.11506476) *Journal of Economic Issues* 36:2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2002.11506476>.

7 [Job Accommodation Network, “Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact,”](https://askjan.org/topics/costs.cfm) updated Sept. 30, 2019. Retrieved June 26, 2020 from <https://askjan.org/topics/costs.cfm>.

8 The loss of needed assistance when higher earnings trigger ineligibility for public benefits.

Appendix

Gaining access: A timeline of legal progress All policies are federal, except where noted. They expand access to:

Basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, health care, and other basic needs

Education and training: means of acquiring skills and knowledge necessary for a chosen occupation

Workplace: transportation, physical accessibility, and technologies that enable access to information and improve job opportunities

1963 The [Community Mental Health Act](#) provided federal funding to establish community mental health centers, allowing people to leave institutions and move back into communities.

1965 The [Social Security Amendments](#) established Medicare and Medicaid to provide medical assistance for "medically needy aged, blind, or disabled persons and dependent children."

1968 The [Architectural Barriers Act](#) required that buildings or facilities designed, built, or altered with federal dollars or leased by federal agencies be accessible.

1972 [Title XVI of the Social Security Act](#) created the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, federalizing income support services for "needy aged, blind, and disabled individuals." State and local governments previously managed the program with partial federal funding.

1973 [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in employment and programs offered by federal agencies and supported by federal dollars.

1975 The [Education for All Handicapped Children Act](#), co-authored by Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords, ensured "free and appropriate public education . . . in the least restrictive environment" and mandated Individualized Education Plans.

1990 The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace, schools, transportation, telecommunications, and all spaces open to the public and required employers to make "reasonable accommodations" for employees.

1990 The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) required schools to prepare students for transition to adulthood, with emphasis on inclusive classrooms and curricula.

1993 Vermont closed the [Brandon Training School](#), the state's only public residential institution serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, open since 1915.

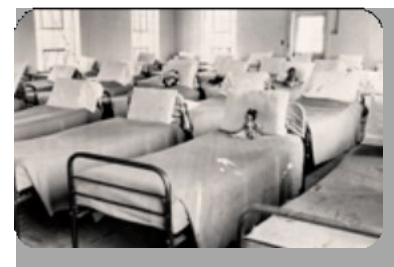
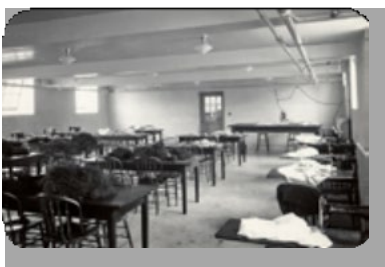
1998 [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) required federal agencies to make printed materials, websites, and other technology accessible to those with disabilities.

1999 The [Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act](#) extended disability benefits and Medicare/Medicaid coverage for those with SSI/SSDI returning to work.

2000 Vermont's [Medicaid for Working Persons with Disabilities](#) program allowed many people with disabilities to work and keep Medicaid coverage despite increased earnings and/or assets.

2002 First in the nation, [Vermont closed its sheltered workshops](#) and shifted funds to employment services for people moving into integrated employment and nonwork options.

2014 The [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#) increased access to federally funded employment and training services, focusing on pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities.



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