



## **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and People with Disabilities** *Vocational Rehabilitation and Competitive Integrated Employment*

Enacted in July of 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) improved workforce training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, providing greater access to inclusion, equitable participation, and economic self-sufficiency. There are approximately 56 million people with disabilities that live in the United States. While employment has steadily risen for people with disabilities over the [past 14 months](#), only 29.2 percent of the population of people with disabilities is employed. Many attribute the consistent increases in disability employment over the past 14 months to the implementation of WIOA and the law's changes that sought to improve competitive, integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

In 2015, prior to full implementation of WIOA, people with disabilities were struggling to find employment, and the labor force participation rate and employment-population rate were actually decreasing from the year prior. Beginning in [April 2016](#), employment rates for people with disabilities began to increase, with rates continually increasing as improvements to vocational rehabilitation were realized and innovative partnerships developed with employers. In [May 2017](#), growth in employment for people with disabilities was greater than the growth in employment for individuals without disabilities. A culture of inclusion and collaboration between employers and service providers enabled people with disabilities to enter and be successful in the workforce.

Many key changes in WIOA led to these improvements. Several of these key changes include:

- Reframing views on employment options for individuals with disabilities as they receive support from vocational rehabilitation agencies through a presumption of ability to be successful in competitive, integrated employment.
- Defining the term “competitive, integrated employment” and prioritizing employment in settings that pay at or above the minimum wage, and inclusive of individuals with disabilities working alongside individuals without disabilities.
- Requiring state vocational rehabilitation agencies to use 15 percent of funds for the provision of pre-employment transition services to better transition youth with disabilities from special education services to meaningful employment.
- Setting forth limitations on the use of 14(c) or special wage certificates that enable employers to pay a subminimum wage. This includes requirements for career exploration and the provision of transition guidance on competitive, integrated employment settings before individuals under the age of 24 may work in sheltered workshops paying subminimum wages.
- Establishing an advisory committee to provide policy and implementation recommendations to help individuals with disabilities achieve competitive, integrated employment. The advisory committee submitted a [final report](#) to the Department of Labor in September 2016 with full support from all stakeholders involved, including advocacy organizations, vocational rehabilitation organizations, and employers including those that utilize 14(c) certificates.