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Media Contact

Sarah Launderville

The Vermont Center for Independent Living

(802) 229-0501

slaunderville@vcil.org

New Report

Working with Disability: Toward a truly inclusive Vermont labor force

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep-rooted structural inequalities in the U.S. Immense, historic and racialized inequity in health and health care and the near-invisible “essential workers” that makes everyone’s daily lives possible.

Who is “essential?” Who is invisible? What rights do people have to safety and dignity in the workplace? Who is considered expendable?

These issues are not new for people with disabilities, who have fought for access to employment and other civil and human rights for more than half a century.

The Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL) has issued a new report with data, history, and personal stories of Vermonters with disabilities. The report shines a light on the achievements and potential of people with disabilities as workers, the barriers and challenges they face, the widespread benefits of an inclusive workplace, and the policies necessary to make Vermont a state where everyone can work productively.

“This readable report is the first of its kind about Vermonters with disabilities and paints a picture of our lives in the state,” VCIL Executive Director Sarah Launderville said. “We’re delighted to be starting a new conversation about how Vermont can tap people with disabilities to fill employment needs in the state, which can help to boost the state’s economy as we emerge from the pandemic.”

Its main points are:

- Vermonters with disabilities are able and willing to work. But only half of the 46,000 of working age are employed.
- Barriers and challenges persist, including the lack of universally designed office systems, limited education options, and inaccessible transportation.
- A truly inclusive workforce would benefit all Vermonters—not just people with disabilities, but their families and communities, other workers and employers—as well as the state economy.
- To fully integrate people with disabilities into the state’s workforce, they need to be able to meet their basic needs; have access to training and higher education; and all workplaces, both in the public and private sectors, need to be accessible to people with disabilities.

The report, the first in a series, was a joint effort of VCIL and the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, the Vermont Division for Vocational Rehabilitation, the Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the Statewide Independent Living Council with support from The Fountain Fund and the Larry Mandell Fund for Racial, Social, and Economic Equity. Public Assets Institute did the research, analysis, writing and design.

VCIL is a Montpelier-based nonprofit organization directed and staffed by individuals with disabilities that works to promote the dignity, independence and civil rights of Vermonters with disabilities.