

New Departments Address Disability Issues

People with disabilities can live independent, productive, and meaningful lives when they have access to the right education, training, supports and services. There are a myriad of programs across federal and state agencies that provide health, education, workforce, and human services for people with disabilities. However, the placement of these programs within government varies from state to state. For example, some states have workforce development departments that include a vocational rehabilitation program, while other states have vocational rehabilitation programs in departments of education or health and human services. This can lead to confusion for consumers and families not knowing where to turn for these services.

Federal Action

At the federal level, cabinet agencies have begun to create their own disability policy offices to help guide how departments address these issues. For example, in FY 2001, Congress created, inside the U.S. Department of Labor, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). The office, headed by an assistant secretary who serves as part of the secretary's leadership team, brings a heightened and permanent long-term focus to the goal of increasing employment of people with disabilities.

The Office supports the creation of more work opportunities and meaningful employment, promotes independence, encourages self-determination and supports inclusion of people with disabilities into their communities.

This brief describes the new federal and state programs and agencies that provide services for people with disabilities to live independent and productive lives.

One broad focus of the office is to conduct research-based demonstration projects to determine what works, in order to integrate successful approaches into mainstream programs. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services followed suit in late 2001, by creating an Office on Disability Policy. Other federal departments are considering similar action. As federal agencies create separate entities related to disabilities, the agencies are finding new ways to work together to achieve their common goals.

State Action

Similar challenges face states as they try to improve services to people with disabilities. A review of state legislative action last year shows that states are emphasizing the creation of stand-alone disability departments. During the 2004 legislative session, Florida's legislature passed a law (SB 1280), which removed the Developmental Disabilities program from the Department of Children and Families and established the new Agency for Persons with Disabilities. The Developmental Disabilities Program within

the Department of Children and Families had been comprised of two main components: developmental disabilities institutions and community-based care. The program provided medical care, employment training, transportation and case management through contracts to community-based care providers paid by federal waivers and general revenue funds.

An analysis of program expenditures from FY 1996 - 2001 showed that the program was running millions of dollars over budget, despite significant funding increases, and the program had a long list of clients waiting for services. A proposed shift of control of the program's fiscal management to the Agency for Health Care Administration was proposed after concerns developed over the management of the program.

The new agency assists people with developmental disabilities and their families by providing services and supports to youth and adults in order for them to lead self-sufficient lives. The agency is to enter into inter-agency agreements with the Agency for Health Care Administration, which administers the state's home and community-based waiver services.

The bill also directs the agency to work with the Department of Children and Families in order to ensure all necessary electronic and paper-based data are accessible to the Medicaid program.





Like Florida, Maryland noticed several challenges that people with disabilities face by their service delivery system. These included duplication and fragmentation of programs across agencies. Three departments were administering seven personal assistance services programs and a variety of state agencies and local counties provided transportation services. Another challenge was the duplication of processes. The Maryland's Department of Disabilities' Web site explains that in order to receive services, individuals with disabilities or their families were overly processed, overly questioned and continually redirected from one agency to the next. To determine eligibility, individuals were required to complete at least six different applications at four different agencies.

In order to alleviate these problems, the Maryland General Assembly created a Department of Disabilities, formerly the Governor's Office for Individuals with Disabilities. This department is the principal staff agency responsible for developing, maintaining, and enforcing statewide disability policies and standards. Specifically, the department will oversee the reform of government delivery of programs and supports through collaboration with all state agencies.

As articulated in the Americans with Disabilities Act and other disability related legislation, government programs and services are being designed and delivered so that people with disabilities can live independent and productive lives. Creating policy offices that enforce compliance or align programs and services is a promising direction for states.

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/ Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Diana Hinton Noel. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications.

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