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America's blind unemployment stands at 70 percent Advocates blame

Journal Record, The (Oklahoma City), Jul 6, 1999 by Lori Johnston Associated Press

ATLANTA -- In a labor market so tight that many employers are begging for workers, 70 percent of blind Americans who want a job can't find one, and advocates blame discrimination, a drop in Braille literacy and, perhaps most important, the computer mouse.

While the nation's overall unemployment rate is at a 29-year low of 4.2 percent, the level of joblessness among the blind has remained stagnant for about a decade, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

"The Americans with Disabilities Act seems to have had no impact on this," said Barbara Pierce, spokeswoman for the National Federation of the Blind at the group's annual convention in Atlanta. The act, passed in 1990, bans discrimination based on disability and requires employers to take "reasonable" steps to accommodate disabled people.

In addition to the 70 percent of the blind who are unemployed, 30 percent of those who are working are considered underemployed in relation to their qualifications, according to the Labor Department.

Over the years, technology has made things much easier for blind people. Converting text to Braille, once a painstaking process, can now be done by computers, and some office equipment is available with Braille-embossed buttons.

But other technology has hurt the employment chances of the 750,000 blind Americans.

Many blind people once worked as receptionists, taking dictation and answering the phone for managers and executives.

But voice mail and e-mail have changed the job description, requiring more computer skills.

And software that requires the user to move around the screen with a mouse and click on icons is nearly impossible for blind people to learn.

Peg Halverson, who has been out of a job for the past two years, said she could use software that includes graphics if someone would put it in a blind-friendly format that relies mostly on keystroke commands and speaks out loud to the user to alert him or her to what is on the screen.

"I want to be employed. I want to contribute to society," said Halverson, 44. "I'm thinking, 'I have a business degree, I have basically 20 years of administrative experience, and I can't even get a customer service job.'"

Pierce said software makers that convert point-and-click programs so that the blind can use them are a couple of years behind the rest of the fast-moving computer industry.

Advocates said another problem has been a decline in the number of blind children learning Braille. During the past 30 years, the percentage of blind children learning Braille in the United States has fallen from about 50 percent to less than 10 percent, according to the federation.

The reason: a push during the past two decades to get blind children out of special schools and "mainstream" them with other youngsters.

The federation backs mainstreaming, but according to Ms. Pierce, many school systems saw it as a chance to cut costs by hiring fewer teachers for disabled students and rolling back Braille instruction to only once or twice a week.

Another big obstacle for blind people trying to find jobs is employers' attitudes, advocates said. Many managers think blind people are helpless and can't be effective workers. "This is pity-based discrimination," Pierce said.

Advocates said there is technology to help the blind in many jobs.

Some companies may balk when told that a blind employee will require a \$3,000 Braille embosser that works like a computer printer that would cost less than \$500. However, Ms. Pierce said, there are state, federal and private programs that help employers pay for such equipment.

At the convention, blind people are attending workshops on writing resumes, interviewing and dealing with discrimination.

Lynn Mattioli, a hospital dietitian in Baltimore, said she doesn't try to avoid the subject of her blindness during job interviews. Instead, she tells employers exactly how she proposes to overcome her disability and get the job done.

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