

PRESENT.:

ALASKA

DISABILITY

POLICY

PROGRESS

**Resolutions
Jointly Developed by:**

**Assistive Technologies of Alaska Advisory Board
Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
State Independent Living Council
Vocational Rehabilitation Advisory Council**

**Distributed by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of
Education**

COMMUNITY INCLUSION AND SUPPORTS

Desired Outcome: Individuals with disabilities use the same community resources to live, learn, work and play as do nondisabled persons and participate in the same local communities activities as do nondisabled persons.

Background: As long as people with disabilities remain segregated, nondisabled people do not get to know them. Segregation - whether the result of stairs or attitudes- creates harmful myths or stereotypes; or worse, sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure. That people with disabilities are invisible or separated, Americans have long assumed is proof that they do not need inclusion or are not capable or worthy of it.

However, reducing or eliminating the need for specialized programs results in reduced costs. Inclusion also enables people with disabilities to be full contributors to their communities. Physical accessibility and access to transportation may be all that is needed for many persons with disabilities to participate in their communities. However, other people with disabilities may require individualized supports such as a personal assistant to help with such tasks as getting out of bed, bathing, dressing and eating or on-the-job training and support. Still others may need assistive technologies such as telctypewriters (TTYs), voice synthesizers, grab bars, Braille keyboards or adapted skis to help them be included in their communities.

Inclusion also means that communities and ordinary citizens see themselves as competent and willing to become involved in the lives of people with disabilities. As long as inclusion is not a reality and people with disabilities remain strangers, nondisabled individuals will continue to believe that special training, considerable patience and clinical certification are required to support people with disabilities in their communities.

Inclusion helps citizens and communities realize that they have the capacity to be with, befriend, care about, work alongside and learn with and from people with disabilities. A shared sense of competency means a willingness and desire to live, learn, work and play together.

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Enforce existing laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Ensure better voter access.
- Designate American Sign Language as a foreign language under Bachelor of Arts requirements.
- Ensure that programs as well as facilities are accessible to people with disabilities.
- Promote better agency/service collaboration.

- Develop the statewide availability of individualized supports such as Interpreters for the Deaf or Orientation and Mobility Specialists for the blind.
- Develop supported avocations.
- Develop training programs for transition from specialized programs to inclusionary ones (e.g. from Special Olympics to Parks and Recreation programs).

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Work with local sports associations and build upon National Soccer Association's activities (e.g. training re: the Americans with Disabilities Act, how to include people with disabilities, grant funds).
- Develop additional inclusive recreation opportunities.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Change the Assistive Technology Loan Fund to make it more consumer friendly.
- Pass a Lemon Law for assistive technology devices and equipment.
- Enact Puppy Guide Dog Legislation.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Advocate for more funding for family/individual supports and recreation.
- Let consumers and families know what their options are for recreation (e.g. Girl Scouts).
- Provide legal training and advocacy re: consumer choice, rights and responsibilities, and access to justice.
- Establish recreation subcommittees on councils and committees. Make more effective use of existing natural supports.
- Establish a State Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Board.
- Encourage people with disabilities to get on community boards and commissions.
- Provide information about disability issues to community groups and civic organizations.

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EDUCATION

Desired Outcome: Children and youth who experience disabilities are receiving specially tailored education programs in classrooms with nondisabled students to help them achieve in accordance with their potential.

Background: All children and youth are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education. Special education means the program of service recommended by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which must include parents, to meet the educational needs of a student with a disability.

The IEP sets forth in writing a commitment of resources necessary to enable a student with a disability to receive needed special and related services. It is also used as an evaluation tool to determine the extent of progress toward meeting the stated goals and objectives. The IEP also includes a statement of the extent to which the student will participate in regular education classes.

Many parents, advocates, educators and policymakers are advocating for every student's full participation in a regular education class with "ownership" of that student shared by both regular and special educators. Many parents with disabilities have found that their children make greater gains academically and socially in integrated classrooms than they did in segregated classrooms. The friendships that their children made with nondisabled students would not have occurred in segregated placements.

Parents report that their children are happier and eager to be doing what their peers are doing. Since academic standards are higher in inclusive settings, students are motivated to achieve at higher levels, whatever their initial level of ability and functioning. Integrated placements often lead to a greater ability to achieve independence and employment as adults. Both parents and students feel that inclusion helps students without disabilities to become more compassionate and understanding.

The costs associated with inclusion and integration can be modest, with possible savings because of fewer due process hearings, fewer mediations, fewer referrals to special education, fewer nonpublic school placements and lower transportation costs. However, in order for inclusion to work, training, planning time and support - which means enough staff and technological assistance - must be made available in local schools.

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Provide training for regular educators and support staff (e.g. bus drivers) so they are able to provide inclusive services for all children and youth.
- Conduct a study recording the optimal class size of inclusive classrooms.
- Work with the university system to ensure that disabilities issues are included and addressed in all academic disciplines.
- Provide opportunities for urban school districts to learn how rural school districts include children and youth with disabilities in their regular education classes.
- Assure the success of the Alaska Transition Initiative.
- Provide low incidence disability training to special and regular education teachers and link training to hands-on technical assistance.
- Ensure that all policy initiatives and programs having an impact on educational attainment and transition to adult life are designed and implemented to meet the needs and maximize the talents of all students, including those with disabilities.

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Conduct a media campaign to inform the general public about the long term benefits of special education.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Review and monitor proposed changes to the education foundation funding formula.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Inform parents about their rights and options regarding a Free Appropriate Education for their children.
- Advocate for increased funding for education.
- Celebrate successes and get the word out about these successes.
- Attend meetings of the State Board of Education and local school districts.

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EMPLOYMENT

Desired Outcome: People with disabilities have the same opportunities to secure employment consistent with their interests and abilities as do people who do not experience disabilities.

Background: 66% of all Alaskans with disabilities are unemployed compared to the average 1996 state unemployment rate of 7.9%. According to a 1994 poll conducted by Lou Harris and Associates, 79% indicate that they want to work. Even when people with disabilities have jobs, they earn far less than their coworkers and are far less likely to be promoted - even when such things as the possibility of their lack of experience or lowered productivity are considered.

There are several reasons for these discrepancies. First and foremost is discrimination. Despite the positive attitudes of many employers and the effectiveness of job accommodations, many companies are still not hiring people with disabilities. Employer prejudice and underestimation of the skills of employees with disabilities--rather than actual work limitations--also translate into lower wages, fewer opportunities for promotion and loss of jobs during times of retrenchment.

Access to health care is the second major obstacle to employment. Even if private health insurance is available, underwriting practices, preexisting condition exclusions and limits on benefits act as critical disincentives to employment. Many people with disabilities are forced to secure public health insurance through Medicaid or Medicare, which is only available to people who are not working.

Public policy is also a barrier to employment. State workers' compensation and private disability insurance too often emphasize compensation for the acquisition of a disability and retirement from the workforce. Little attention is given to assessing functional capacities and productivity with appropriate accommodations. In addition, people with disabilities have never been routinely considered as a potential part of the labor force; disability is poorly understood and communicated in the state's larger employment policy agenda. The implicit assumption is that Alaskans with disabilities are not expected to be part of the workforce.

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Ensure that generic employment and labor policy and programs presume that people with disabilities are part of the Alaskan workforce.
- Vigorously support full enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Convene work group to identify state policy work disincentives and determine what can be done to address them.
- Improve the state purchasing regulations regarding bidder preference (provide training for purchasing agents, ensure existing policies and procedures are being followed),
- Issue an executive order directing the Department of Labor to promote the employment of people with disabilities and establish employment goals to be reached by the year 2007.
- Add people with disabilities as a group within the state labor force statistics and monitor

reasons people with disabilities report for not working across types of disability, local areas, and diverse cultural and ethnic groups.

- Establish a working group of employers and people with disabilities to identify and expand meaningful financial incentives.

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Work with targeted businesses and industries (e.g. airlines, tourism), unions and public employers to promote the employment of people with disabilities and establish employment goals to be reached by the year 2007.
- Conduct state and local media campaigns designed to change public attitudes and promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Provide training for line supervisors and personnel directors.
- Provide information about financial incentives to employers.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Establish a separate insurance pool for people with preexisting-conditions.
- Enact legislation ensuring that adequate health care and long-term supports--including personal assistance services and assistive technology--are available to people with disabilities who are employed, are seeking employment or are changing jobs.
- Enact legislation enabling local government entities to give preferential hire to people with disabilities.
- Develop and fund initiatives to promote innovative employment and entrepreneurship among people with disabilities.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Provide training to people with disabilities regarding their employment rights and responsibilities.
- Identify ways to better employ and support people from undersexed groups.

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HEALTH CARE

Desired Outcome: Accessible, affordable and comprehensive health care is available to all Alaskans without regard to a person's health, functional status or sociodemographic factors (e.g. age, ethnicity, employment, income).

Background: Alaskans with disabilities have identified the lack of access to adequate health care and insurance as a major barrier to independent living and employment. The existing health care system is designed to address acute rather than chronic health conditions and, as such, rarely provides for the longterm services and supports that are often needed by people with disabilities.

As the cost of health care and health insurance has risen, people with disabilities have found it increasingly difficult to meet their needs through private insurance. The high cost of health insurance means that many people with disabilities go without health care; even those individuals who are able to secure health insurance are not insured for preexisting conditions. Although Alaska has a high-risk pool, the cost is prohibitive. Some parents have had to relinquish custody of their children to the state to get medical coverage for them until a Medicaid waiver can be obtained.

While the majority of Alaskans with disabilities have some private health insurance, few have adequate coverage that they can depend on to meet their needs, given preexisting-condition exclusions, minimal benefit packages and benefit caps. In addition, the common needs of people with disabilities for durable medical equipment, assistive technology and personal assistance services are rarely fully covered.

Public health care is often the only avenue available to Alaskans with disabilities; people with disabilities are more likely to receive health care through public sector programs than people without disabilities. Since public health insurance is generally available to those who are not working, access to adequate and affordable health insurance is a major barrier to employment. In addition, Medicaid is virtually the only source of reimbursement for long-term services and it is generally unavailable to those who are working. The Medicaid program itself has taken significant cuts in funding over the past few years; people with disabilities no longer have funding for eyeglasses, hearing aids, acute dental care and occupational therapy.

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Ensure that managed care initiatives are consumer-friendly.
- Assess number and impact of loss of benefits by legal aliens in Alaska.
- Transform Medicaid's insitutional bias into a presumption that long-term services and supports should be provided in the home and community.
- Work with both public and private insurers to update benefits more accurately reflect the health needs of people with disabilities, particularly in the areas of assistive technology and personal assistance services.
- Assess implications of Tort Reform.

- Develop mental health services for persons who are both developmentally disabled and mentally ill.
- Promote access for people with disabilities to generic public health services such as health education, wellness, nutrition counseling, smoking cessation programs and prevention of secondary disabilities.
- Develop and implement training programs that will sensitize health care providers to the ongoing health care needs of people with disabilities.
- Ensure easy access to diagnosis and treatment and streamline paperwork.

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Secure input from the general public on strategies for achieving a health care system that spreads risk, is driven by consumers of health services and covers everyone.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Restore Medicaid funding of vision, hearing, acute dental care and occupational therapy services for adults.
- Enact legislation limiting preexisting-condition exclusions and improving portability and renewability of private insurance coverage.
- Ensure that whatever health care reform is implemented in Alaska is consumer-driven and includes the following features: adequate consumer information; quality standards; adequate appeals and grievance processes; and consumer governance.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Provide training to enable people with disabilities to become more informed consumers of health plans and services.
- Provide training to people with disabilities on how to make effective use of Social Security and Internal Revenue Service work incentives.

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HOUSING

Desired Outcome: Alaskans with disabilities are able to secure accessible and affordable housing in the community.

Background: Accessible, available and affordable housing is key to the independence and full participation of Alaskans with disabilities in their local communities. Historically, people with disabilities led "out of sight, out of mind" lives in segregated institutions. Despite recent downsizing of institutions, freedom of choice in where to live remains an elusive goal for many Alaskans with disabilities.

Multiple obstacles prevent people with disabilities from securing adequate housing in the community. To start with, low income levels make rent payments unaffordable or limit access to mortgage loans; even when people with disabilities secure government assistance, they are the group most likely to live in severely inadequate housing.

For those individuals who do own or rent their own homes, the cost of modifications to make them fully accessible and usable is often prohibitive. Even if modifications are affordable, people with disabilities may be forced to settle for inadequate ones because designers and contractors skilled in barrierfree and universal design are unavailable.

For some Alaskans with disabilities, the choice of where to live is limited by funding agencies or service providers. Funding for support services is often tied to congregate living situations or service providers are only able to provide support services within a group setting. Service providers rather than people with disabilities own the homes where services are provided. Developing a community-based support structure independent of housing programs requires considerable redirection of funds and extensive program development time.

Accessible housing stock is extremely limited in Alaska. While there is considerable evidence that home modifications and appropriate design can decrease service costs, make caregiving easier and prevent institutionalization, there is no state policy guiding the funding and delivery of home modifications and repairs or the design of housing that maximizes the independence of people with disabilities.

Universal design is a concept that addresses the scope of accessibility and seeks to make all elements and spaces accessible to and usable by all people to the greatest extent possible; it means buildings and items that are usable by most people regardless of their level of ability or disability (e.g. lever handles rather than round doorknobs). It need not increase costs or result in special or different-looking structures or features (Center for Universal Design).

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Review the accessibility standards of other states (e.g. Washington, Texas) and assess applicability to Alaska.
- Provide grantwriting and other technical assistance to service providers on accessing available state and federal dollars for housing.
- Strengthen the enforcement of existing fair housing and civil rights laws by including people with disabilities in monitoring and testing the housing, banking, real estate, design and construction industries.
- Develop initiatives to ensure affordable housing (e.g. home modification programs, requiring that housing vouchers be considered as income by rental agents, building owners, banks and mortgage companies).
- Develop initiatives to promote the universal and accessible design of housing (e.g. require a basic level of access in all new dwelling units and in all renovations, promote a level of accessibility that would enable people with disabilities to comfortably visit homes in all single family construction through code changes and education).

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Provide information and training on universal design to architects, contractors, designers and building inspectors.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Fully fund the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation's (AHFC) proposed FY98 budget, including \$2.5 million in special needs housing, \$750,000 in homeless services and \$3.0 million in HOME match funds.
- Target state housing dollars towards rural communities which are not eligible for federal housing funds.
- Redirect housing funding away from separate housing or housing that requires special terms or conditions and toward housing in the most inclusive settings with maximum control by people with disabilities.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Supply information regarding numbers and extent of need to the legislature, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and the AHFC.
- Request training from AHFC on ways to acquire state and federal funds for people with disabilities to own their own homes.

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TRANSPORTATION

Desired Outcome: Accessible transportation is available to all Alaskans with disabilities.

Background: Accessible transportation is one of the keys to employment and community participation for people with disabilities. Alaska has seen an increase in both the accessibility of the generic fixed-route bus system and the use of paratransit since the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, although full accessibility remains a long term goal.

However, only a few Alaskan communities have public transportation. Where it does exist, it is limited. In addition, uncoordinated transportation systems create additional barriers in some communities (e.g. eligibility restrictions or limited hours of service). Many people with disabilities do not live in areas served by public transportation and thus rely on private vehicles. However, buying a car may be difficult because of the additional expense of adapting a vehicle and the general low income level of people with disabilities.

Alaska's rail and ferry systems are also increasing their accessibility. Other forms of transportation such as private shuttle vans, cruise ships and other large boats, taxis and airplanes are increasingly accessible, although people with disabilities cannot take accessibility for granted when traveling. Despite progress, persistent problems remain, including poorly maintained equipment and untrained or poorly trained operators and service staff.

In addition to the elimination of physical barriers, transportation access for people with disabilities includes the removal of structural, communication and environmental barriers. Expanded visual access (e.g. signage, electronic message boards) and teletypewriters (TTYs) are needed by people with hearing disabilities. Auditory detectable warnings as well as Braille and large print copies of activities and timetables are needed by people with vision loss.

Two other common transportation obstacles for people with disabilities in Alaska are lack of curb cuts from sidewalks to streets and inadequate sidewalk snow removal. Without curb cuts and snow removal, use of fixed-route bus systems and other means of transportation is limited, possibly resulting in greater use of the more costly paratransit services.

Proposed Administrative Strategies:

- Fully implement the Governor's Executive Order to facilitate coordination of transportation at the state and local levels.
- Aggressively enforce existing transportation statutes and regulations related to people with disabilities.
- Ensure communication accessibility in transportation facilities, services and vehicles, as well as on streets and highways (e.g. improved signage for people with visual impairments; flashing and audible emergency alarms in facilities and vehicles).

Proposed General Public Strategies:

- Work with hotels and hospitals to designate places for lift-equipped vehicles to load and unload passengers with disabilities.
- Provide training targeted toward transportation operators and related service personnel.
- Work with local government entities to enforce existing laws for curb cuts and sidewalk snow removal and budget funds for these activities.

Proposed Legislative Strategies:

- Change the Assistive Technology Loan Fund to make it more consumer friendly.
- Provide additional operating and capital funds, including flexible capital, in order to expand public transit.
- Fund more accessible rural transit services and other forms of rural transportation for the general public and for people with disabilities.

Proposed Disability Community Strategies:

- Congratulate and publicly acknowledge the collaborative and supportive activities (joint planning and funding) of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.
- Secure additional information on the transportation needs of people who are deaf or hearing impaired and people who are blind or visually impaired.
- Publicize the availability of assistive technology loans for vehicle modifications and other assistive technology.
- Provide training to people with disabilities about laws and practices affecting accessible transportation.

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