



Issue Statements

National Rehabilitation Association

Government Affairs Summit

March 2015

NATIONAL REHABILITATION ASSOCIATION'S 2015 ISSUE STATEMENTS

Approved by the National Rehabilitation Association's Board of Directors on February 24, 2015

"The National Rehabilitation Association (NRA) is a member organization whose mission is to promote ethical and state-of-the-art practice in rehabilitation with the goal of the personal and economic independence of persons with disabilities."

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The Rehabilitation Professional: Qualifications Count

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

Qualified rehabilitation professionals provide the services and supports to Americans with disabilities as they transition from the medical aspects of disability to the workplace and independent living.

There is a critical shortage of qualified rehabilitation professionals across the spectrum of disciplines that serve as members of the rehabilitation support team. None is more acute than the need for increased numbers of qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors with the skills set that individuals with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities, require and deserve.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

This shortage of qualified rehabilitation professionals becomes even more significant when you consider that a disability may impact an individual at any time during the life cycle of employment. Whether an individual is born with a disability or acquires one during their career due to an accident, illness, injury, or as a result of aging, they often need the support and expertise of qualified rehabilitation counselors.

The President's 2016 budget request to Congress includes the following:

"Currently, VR agencies are undergoing dramatic turnover in their staffs due to the retirement of a large number of qualified counselors. According to 2013 data from the State VR agencies, there were 1,622 vacancies out of the 17,655 total positions nationwide in these offices. Over the next 5 years, these agencies projected an additional 5,201 vacancies. This would mean that, in the next 5 years, State VR agencies may need to hire as much as 39 percent of their staff to maintain current staffing levels. The Department believes that similar shortages, though not as severe, will also affect other VR providers in the same timeframe."

The aging workforce is growing as people continue to work longer either because they have to or by choice. Business also benefits from the supports of qualified rehabilitation

professionals who work to prepare and provide talent as well as keeping valued employees working and contributing to the bottom line of America's companies.

Then, there is the all-important issue of the number of our wounded warriors who have returned home, will continue to be returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan, or other areas across the globe, and the realization that many others will be called into combat at any given moment.

The State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (VR) continue to serve at least one million eligible Americans with disabilities, including veterans, who have developed or will develop non-service connected disabilities.

The VR Program is a public/private/State/Federal program administered by the U.S. Department of Education in conjunction with its Community Rehabilitation Programs/Partners (CRPs).

Indeed, many of the State VR agencies have Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and jointly serve our wounded warriors based upon the MOUs.

The National Rehabilitation Association believes that all eligible Americans with disabilities, including our heroes at home, deserve the best that this country has to give. To do less, is not an option.

One of the hallmarks of the Rehabilitation Act of 1975, as amended, has always been to provide the very best individualized supports and services by qualified rehabilitation counselors in both the public and private sectors.

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD), which became part of the Rehabilitation Act in 1992, was developed to do just that. As we all know, credentials count, and they always will.

These qualifications include the establishment and maintenance of education and experience requirements in the State to ensure that personnel have an understanding of vocational rehabilitation, including the medical and psychological aspects of disability, counseling and guidance strategies, vocational assessment, person-centered planning, career services and building relationships with businesses who would like to hire or retain individuals with disabilities in their companies.

RECOMMENDATION:

Our country is fortunate to have some of the best and the brightest in the rehabilitation field.

Qualified rehabilitation counselors in both the public and private sectors have, by their training in the rehabilitation disciplines, the skills set that is needed for Americans with disabilities to succeed in their careers and in life.

These skills include: rehabilitation and career counseling; rehabilitation engineering; job training; job placement; transition from school-to-work; business relations; among others, to prepare eligible Americans with disabilities, including veterans, with the education and person-centered training they need to succeed in pursuing post-secondary education and ultimately rewarding careers.

The Training Programs in Title III of the Rehabilitation Act have not received an increase in funding in almost 20 years.

Accordingly, given the critical shortage now and in the future of qualified rehabilitation counselors and the ever-increasing number of Americans who will seek services and supports in the future, the National Rehabilitation Association respectfully requests an increase in training funds of an additional \$50 million.

Moreover, in concurrence with the Rehabilitation Counseling Coalition (RCC), we are recommending that under the "other comparable requirements" provision in the CSPD, that the Office of the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) define other comparable requirements as the skills domain of personnel providing VR services which must be acquired and continually updated to reflect an evolving workforce to include: (a) competence in counseling and guidance; (b) knowledge and application of the medical and psychological aspects of disability; (c) knowledge and implementation of vocational testing; (d) working knowledge and integration of labor market data and disability employment policy and (e) providing the services required to develop and implement individualized career plans that assist persons with disabilities in successful employment in a competitive, integrated work environment.

For VR staff working directly with business/employers, the RCC recommends regulatory guidance related to developing competence of staff to effectively work with employers in providing business services defined in Section 109.

The TEACH Act

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

Until colleges and universities have accessibility guidelines for technology, blind college students will be denied access to critical course material.

BACKGROUND:

Blind students are facing insurmountable barriers to education. Instead of fulfilling the promise of equal access, technology has created more problems than the print world ever did. Data show that students with disabilities face a variety of challenges, including matriculation failure, solely because colleges and universities are sticking with the ad hoc accommodations model instead of embracing accessibility.

Institutions of higher education need help to identify accessible material and comply with non-discrimination laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) require schools to provide equal access. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice and Education clarified that the use of inaccessible technology is prohibited under these civil rights laws.

RECOMMENDATION:

The National Rehabilitation Association supports the recently-introduced Technology, Education and Accessibility in College and Higher Education Act (the TEACH Act) and respectfully requests your support of this vitally-needed legislation.

Accessibility solutions are available, but guidelines are desperately needed to guide the market. Equal access requirements have no criteria for accessibility that schools can use when selecting technology. Innovations in text-to-speech, re-refreshable Braille, and other accessibility features, are widely available, but developers and manufacturers will incorporate only solutions that are demanded by the market.

The TEACH Act develops accessibility guidelines for instructional materials used in post-secondary education. A purpose-based Commission is tasked with developing accessibility criteria for instructional materials and the delivery systems technologies used to access those materials so that the schools and developers can identify what makes a product usable by the blind.

The TEACH Act provides incentives for institutions of higher education to follow the guidelines. Institutions of higher education that use only technology that conforms with the guidelines will be deemed in compliance with the provisions of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) that pertain to schools' use of technology.

REFERENCES:

Association of Research Libraries "Report of the ARL Joint Task Force to Patrons With Print Disabilities." Research Library Issues, 2012 6.

Report of the Commission on Accessible Instructional Materials in Post-Secondary Education for Students with Disabilities (2011) 13.

Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and Department of Education Civil Rights Division letter to College and University Presidents, June 29, 2010.

Government Accountability Office (GAO) 'Education Needs A Coordinated Approach To Improve Its Assistance To Schools in Supporting Students.'

Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of

Representatives, 10-33 (2009).

Wounded Warriors Federal Leave Act of 2015

Statement of Issue:

Many of our Wounded Warriors return home with service-connected disabilities, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other health issues. Many of our heroes at home, who were gainfully employed before serving our country had steady, good-paying jobs which are not always available to them after serving for long, in some cases multiple, tours of duty overseas.

Background and Discussion:

Both Houses of Congress are seeking ways in which to make our wounded warriors return to the workforce more successful and equitable by introducing bills in both the House and Senate, H.R. 313, and S. 242, respectively, entitled the Wounded Warrior Federal Leave Act of 2015.

These bills, which enjoy bipartisan support, would entitle any employee looking for work in the Federal government who is a veteran with a service-connected disability rated at 30% or more, during a 12-month period, to receive 104 hours of leave without reduction in pay, for purposes of undergoing medical treatment for such disability.

The bill's principal sponsor in the House (H.R. 313) is Congressman Steve Lynch (D.MA.) and at this time include co-sponsors Congressman G.K. Butterfield (D.N.C.), Congressman Blake Farenthold (R.TX); Congressman Gerry Connolly (D.VA.), Walter Jones (R.N.C.), Elijah Cummings (D.MD.), and others.

The bill's principal sponsors in the Senate (S. 242) are Senator John Tester, D.MT.) and Senator Jerry Moran (R.KS.), and others.

RECOMMENDATION:

The National Rehabilitation Association supports this legislation and believes giving our heroes at home a hand up to Federal employment is a win-win for our veterans, the Federal government and our country.

Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

The Older Americans Act Reauthorization was due to be reauthorized in 2011 and in January of this year, S. 192 was reported out favorably by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee.

S. 192, which enjoys bipartisan support, was introduced by Senators Lamar Alexander (R.TN.), the Chairman of the Committee, and Senator Patty Murray (D.WA.), the Ranking Member of the Committee, Senator Richard Burr (R.N.C.) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I.VT.).

Although there is no companion legislation in the House at this time, Congressman John Kline (R.MN.), Chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, has advised that he intends to take up this legislation in this Session of Congress.

DISCUSSION AND BACKGROUND

S. 192, which reauthorizes the Older Americans Act, includes legislative language that would amend the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) which provides information to caregivers about available services, assistance in accessing services, individualized counseling, support groups, caregiver training, respite care, and supplemental services.

The National Rehabilitation Association is especially pleased that S. 192 would extend the National Family Caregiver Support Program to older caregivers to their adult children (age 19 to 59) with disabilities.

Parents of children and adults with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities, face increasing challenges as parents age.

This important legislation would extend much-needed critical assistance to those parents whose children are living longer and leading more productive lives in providing these necessary services.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates the bill would authorize appropriations totaling \$5.8 billion for fiscal years 2016-2018, and Pay-As-You-Go provisions (PAYGO) (offsets) would not apply.

RECOMMENDATION:

The National Rehabilitation Association applauds the spirit of bi-partisanship that has characterized discussions on S. 192 during the Senate HELP Committee process and is especially pleased to support this legislation which will extend the National Family Caregiver Support Program to older caregivers of adult children with disabilities.

This legislation is expected to be brought to the full Senate Floor during this, the First Session of the 114th Congress.

Extend the CHIP Program

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provides much-needed health care to those children and families who do not qualify for Medicaid, is due to expire on September 30, 2015.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

For the past 18 years, the Children's Health Insurance Program has been disbursing money to States but gives States flexibility to tailor how they provide coverage to meet the needs of children and families who qualify for this program.

As a result of this legislation, the number of uninsured children in America has dropped by half. Children miss less school time because of illness or injury and there is a significant decline in childhood obesity.

Senators Sherrod Brown (D.OH.) and Debbie Stabenow (D.MI.) have introduced the bill, S. 428, entitled Stabilize Medicaid and CHIP Coverage Act of 2015, which would extend the CHIP Program until 2019

In the House, Congressman Gene Green (D.TX.) has introduced companion legislation, H.R. 919, the CHIP Extension and Improvement Act of 2015.

While the recently-enacted Affordable Care Act covers some of these children, significant gaps remain in coverage.

We all know that sick children do not learn and children who do not learn because of their health may not pursue post-secondary education or employment which ultimately leads to good-paying jobs, furthering their education and careers and becoming taxpaying citizens of our country.

RECOMMENDATION:

The National Rehabilitation Association supports legislation that will further the education and careers of all children, including children from working class families who do not qualify for Medicaid.

Extending the CHIP Program does exactly that and we encourage you to support this legislation.

Oppose Cuts to Concurrent SSDI and UI Benefits

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

Recently, legislation was introduced in the Senate to cut concurrent Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Unemployment Insurance Benefits (UI). This bill, S. 343, entitled the "Reducing Overlapping Payments Act", would zero out SSDI benefits in any month in which an SSDI beneficiary also received UI benefits even if the individual(s) lost their job through no fault of their own.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

SSDI and UI were established for different purposes and largely service different populations. UI insures workers against the loss of a job through no fault of their own. SSDI insures workers against a significant disability that prevents substantial work (but not all work). As highlighted in a 2012 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, less than one percent of individuals served by SSDI and UI receive concurrent benefits.

Encouraging SSDI beneficiaries to work has long been a cornerstone of bipartisan Congressional policy. Cutting or eliminating benefits for SSDI beneficiaries who have tried to work but have been laid off through no fault of their own, and qualify for Unemployment Benefits, could have the unintended consequence of penalizing beneficiaries and discourage attempts to work.

Like all Americans, SSDI beneficiaries who work seek greater economic security for themselves and their families. To qualify, SSDI beneficiaries must meet one of the strictest standards in the world. At the same time, some people with significant disabilities who receive SSDI may be able to work part time to help them get by, may lose their part-time job and then receive unemployment insurance.

RECOMMENDATION:

The National Rehabilitation Association strongly supports individuals with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities, who want to work, and opposes any cuts to SSDI if an individual with a disability is working, gets laid off, and then applies for Unemployment Insurance.

To do otherwise, is to cut a lifeline to those individuals with significant disabilities who want to work, have worked, and just like their non-disabled peers, have been laid off.

Please do not allow Americans with disabilities to be treated differently because of their disability.