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Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** is a **significant federal law for workforce development** because it funds support programs at the local, state, and national levels to help people get ready for work and enhance their chances in the job market. It was first passed in 1998 and was updated in 2014.

These programs **offer a mix of education and training services, including job search support, career advice, skill training, classroom learning, and on-the-job training.** The goal is to boost employment and earnings for workers. Additionally, WIOA renews the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which focuses on assisting individuals with disabilities in seeking employment.

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Why It Matters

WIOA focuses on helping people who face challenges in finding a job, especially those with disabilities.

The State Vocational Rehabilitation program is essential to the state workforce development system for individuals with disabilities. **It strongly emphasizes getting individuals ready for jobs where they earn competitive wages, above minimum wage, in workplaces that are not separate from others.** Even though some employers and programs can get certificates to pay employees with disabilities less than the minimum wage under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, WIOA has rules to limit this practice. The goal is to help individuals with disabilities secure jobs where they earn regular wages and are integrated into the workforce.

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Workforce Development Activities

WIOA Title I, managed by the U.S. Department of Labor, funds three grant programs for states—for adults, those who lost jobs, and youth—along with various national programs such as research and technical assistance and the Job Corps, a residential career training program.

The goal of workforce development activities is to train workers for jobs that are in local demand. These activities are meant to be well-coordinated, follow the same performance measures, and be controlled locally. **The WIOA system is organized around about 3,000 local One-Stop centers run by local Workforce Development Boards—a total of 593 in the U.S.** These centers bring together and provide employment and training services. People who qualify can access services through these One-Stop centers, offering universal access for everyone, regardless of age or employment status. However, **priority is given to those with low income and those facing barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities.**

There are parts of WIOA Title I to help individuals with disabilities, including:

- **Each state has to come up with plans** to improve job opportunities for people with low income and those who face challenges in finding work, including individuals with disabilities.
- **Every local workforce board must have a group** that gives information and help specifically for individuals with disabilities.
- **The local workforce development board is responsible for leading efforts** to find ways to make sure that people with disabilities can easily access both physical places and programs.

- **Local boards must check yearly** to see if their programs are accessible for people with disabilities.

- **Young people with disabilities who are not in school can participate in activities** like GED preparation or job training under the Title I Youth program, and it doesn't depend on how much money their family makes or other characteristics.

- **Through the One-Stop centers, local programs can make different job-related programs work together better and offer support** to help people with challenges in finding jobs, including those with disabilities, go through different services and activities more efficiently.



Adult Education and Family Literacy

The adult education and family literacy programs funded by WIOA Title II, overseen by the U.S. Department of Education, offer various services for individuals with disabilities. These include **fundamental instruction in reading and math for those who haven't reached a basic level, preparing for the GED exam, and teaching English to non-English speakers.**

- State and local providers can also use federal funds for things like creating better tools to assess the progress of individuals with disabilities, including assessments for learning disabilities.
- When choosing local providers to offer these services, states must consider how well a provider can help individuals with disabilities.
- On a national level, the U.S. Department of Education can develop, replicate, and share the best ways of working with adults who have disabilities.

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Vocational Rehabilitation

Every state has at least one Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. In 34 states, there is only one VR agency, while 22 states have two (one specifically helps individuals who are blind or have visual impairments). These agencies offer services to people with disabilities to assist them in getting ready for, finding, keeping, or regaining employment.

To qualify for VR services, a person must have a physical or mental condition that significantly hinders their ability to work. They should be able to benefit from VR services regarding employment and need these services to prepare for, start, continue, or hold onto a job. If the agency cannot serve everyone who qualifies, it gives priority to those with the most severe disabilities.

People often get referred to VR agencies by schools, hospitals, or welfare agencies, but those who are eligible can also apply directly. **Some VR agencies operate on “order of selection” and may be on a waiting list to receive services.**

Services provided by these agencies can include diagnosing or evaluating a disability, creating a personalized rehabilitation plan, training, helping with job placement, and offering other support services to help individuals get and keep a job.



Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

When WIOA was last updated in 2014, the law stated that VR agencies must set aside at least 15% of their federal funds for services that prepare students with disabilities for employment and postsecondary education before graduation, also called pre-employment transition services. **If a student is recognized as having a disability under IDEA or Section 504, they are considered potentially eligible for Pre-ETS.**

1. Job Exploration Counseling
2. Work-Based Learning
3. Counseling on Postsecondary Education Opportunities
4. Workplace Readiness Training
5. Instruction in Self-Advocacy

Additional Resources

- [The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#)
- [Congressional Research Service, The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the One-Stop Delivery System](#)