

## Employers With Labor Shortages Should Look To People With Disabilities

(NAPSA)—It is a fact that more individuals with disabilities are in the workplace earning real wages today than ever before. Certainly, the booming economy has a lot to do with it, but there is much more to the story than just that.

The unsung hero in the struggle to enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities is the Federal/State Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program, authorized and funded under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. For 81 years, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program has helped 14 million people with disabilities prepare to enter or re-enter the workplace.

Every state has a vocational rehabilitation agency whose sole purpose is to assist people with disabilities obtain the skills, training, and confidence necessary to enable them to take their rightful place in the economy. However, until the passage of Sec. 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, and later the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, opportunities in the workplace were limited and often resulted in placement in sheltered workshops. With advances in technology and the shortage of qualified workers, new mainstream work opportunities are becoming more available for persons with disabilities at all levels of the pay scale.

Last year, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program assisted 225,000 people with disabilities across the nation in entering the work force. Collectively, they earned \$2.9 billion and paid \$850 million in Federal/State taxes. The problem is, while companies are desperate for qualified workers, there is a long waiting list for the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program due to a lack of funds.

In 1999, the combined Federal/State funding for vocational rehabilitation was \$3 billion. The return on investment for putting 225,000 people into the workforce was \$2.9 billion in the first year alone. With an additional \$240



million in Federal funding and matching State funds of \$48 million, an additional 125,000 people would be served and 25,000 additional skilled, professional and qualified individuals with disabilities would go to work, earn real wages and pay taxes. In addition, they would eventually no longer be supported by programs like Social Security.

A bonus to this cause is recent legislation—the Work Incentive Improvement Act—that encourages and empowers people with disabilities to enter the workplace. This law makes it possible for disabled workers to maintain health coverage available to them under Medicaid and Medicare, removing a real obstacle for those who feared losing health coverage by going back to work.

The American economy needs workers, people with disabilities need work and all levels of government would welcome additional taxpayers. Employers who need workers at all levels—from service and trade to executive level—should contact their state's Vocational Rehabilitation Office.

Those who feel strongly about the need for additional funding to support these programs, especially in light of the significant return on investment, should contact their State, Federal and local elected officials and express their opinion.

For more information, please contact the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation at (202) 638-4634.