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ODEP at 20: Driving Change and Creating Opportunity

• By: [Jennifer Sheehy](#) • January 28, 2021

For those of us in the U.S. Department of Labor's [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#), this year is a momentous one, marking 20 years since our establishment. It's a time for both celebration and reflection, especially as we work to ensure *all* Americans are included in our economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

ODEP was established by Congress in fiscal year 2001, but our roots trace back to the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities that was formed in 1998. The task force proposed and designed ODEP, establishing the interagency connections that are the hallmark of our work today. ODEP's creation also heralded an important shift in how we talk about disability and employment in America, one focused not on whether people with disabilities can work, but rather the strategies and supports that drive the change needed to make work happen. And how do we know what those strategies and supports are? The answer lies in *evidence-based data*.

One of ODEP's early endeavors was to develop a means for reliable and accurate monthly data collection on the employment status of people with disabilities. Following more than seven years of extensive research and testing, we partnered with the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2008 to add six disability-related questions to the [monthly Current Population Survey](#), the official source for estimates on U.S. labor force participation, employment and unemployment. As a result, monthly data on the employment status of people with disabilities were released for the first time in January 2009 — and have been every month since.

In addition, ODEP collaborated with BLS and the department's [Chief Evaluation Office](#) to gather additional data through supplements to the Current Population Survey in May 2012 and July 2019. Through these supplements, ODEP gleaned critical information on prior work experience, career and financial assistance, workplace improvement requests, barriers to employment and other related topics from respondents with disabilities. For example, data from the supplements pinpointed a lack of transportation as an ongoing barrier to work for many people with disabilities. As a result, in partnership with the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#) and the [U.S. Access Board](#), ODEP is engaging disability advocates and private industry to promote more accessible transportation options — especially inclusive autonomous vehicles that can help people with disabilities get to work.

Data on effectiveness is key to the success of our [State Exchange on Employment and Disability initiative](#) that supports state and local governments as they adopt and implement inclusive employment policies. Among these are “state as model employer” policies, which can have a significant impact on the employment of people with disabilities and serve as a model for the private sector.

Data allow us to measure progress made and opportunity to come, and in the case of disability employment, they help *drive change* toward a more inclusive workforce — the crux of our mission at ODEP since day one. From evidence-based data to policy to employment supports, we have been driving change and creating opportunity for 20 years. We look forward to highlighting these efforts and building upon them as we continue to strive for full workforce inclusion.

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