

California Workforce Association and its members are paving the way for people with disabilities



People with disabilities are disproportionately un- and underemployed. A consortium of agencies is working to change that.

BY: [ANNE STOKES](#) FEBRUARY 2, 2023

According to the Department of Labor, individuals with a disability were significantly more likely to be unemployed than their typically abled peers. Across all age groups, only 19% of people with a disability were working in 2021 versus nearly 64% of those without a disability. And 29% of workers with a disability were employed part-time versus 16% of those without a disability.

“Many people with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities, (may not) know that there are career opportunities out there for them,” says MaryAnn Pranke, [Verdugo Workforce Development Board](#) member and coordinator for [GlendaleLEARNS](#). “Caseworkers don’t even know, people who work with them daily who would love to provide resources to the people they work with, they don’t know about the career opportunities out there. ... And even less know that there’s anybody out there who can actually help them get a job.”

A path to success

The Verdugo CNC Machinist Academy at [Glendale Community College](#) provides career opportunities for individuals with disabilities. A collaboration between the college, GlendaleLEARNS, the Department of Rehabilitation, the Lanterman Group and the Verdugo Job Center, the program was specifically designed for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the first in Los Angeles County.

“What we do is we design the programs to bring together the partners and the employers to be able to design the career pathways,” Pranke says. “We’re trying to get livable wages here and the only way to do that is to look at manufacturing (and) high tech industries.”

Pranke notes that the program's placement rate was about 86% and that wages start at \$16, but some students have gone on to earn \$40 an hour. With such success, they're looking to expand the program to include other industries, including information technology, bio-manufacturing and digital media.

The program also provides supportive services like tutoring and job coaching. Verdugo pays for students' registration fees, books, tools, transportation and other needs. As added incentives for companies, they're also able to subsidize paid externship opportunities and on-the-job training, as well as coach employers in creating an inclusive work environment.

"You'd be surprised at how small of a change can really help someone perform a job that you have," says Melissa Younesian, manager of the Verdugo Job Center. "I think a lot of employers feel that when it comes to accommodations, they need to rebuild their entire building to accommodate someone. It could be something as simple as a screen on the computer or maybe a voice-activated keyboard."

Streamlining the way

The CNC Machinist Academy is a collaborative effort designed to provide a seamless educational experience for students, minimizing administrative requirements and streamlining access to supportive services. Program partners assist students with enrollment, financial needs, books and equipment, finding a job and post-employment supports.

"We all came together to be able to provide this program and set up a training that would be effective for students, guide them through it and provide resources," says Dr. Alfred Ramirez, administrative dean of Continuing and Community Education for Glendale Community College District and director of GlendaleLEARNs. "All of this would be done through our collaboration on the back end instead of having the student go through it all. This is what made it a lot more successful and I think this is what provided the students with a better experience, to be able to just concentrate on going to school, getting through that part and assimilating into the workforce."

But while supportive services are readily available, modifications to coursework are not.

"Whatever they need, we will provide the support, but we're not going to modify that program because they have to be able to get a job and keep that job," Pranke explains. "What we've learned is that employers hire and retain talent, not charity. Even those who are willing to take on an employee with a disability out of charity, if that person can't produce, they're not going to keep that person. We need to make sure that our students have the skills to be able to get that job and keep that job. They can't do that if we don't prepare them correctly."

Providing guidance

Another common obstacle to employment for many people with disabilities is the loss of Supplemental Security Income benefits. As with many support programs, SSI requirements can be complicated to navigate, but are vital to many individuals with disabilities, particularly health care.

“We try to draw out a plan for them so they understand what it really means if they get a job and what those milestones are they need to look for if they don’t want to lose their benefits,” explains Younesian. “A bigger part of it is really to explain to them that it’s OK if they do end up making more money and losing parts of their benefits because they get more if they are working and making wages.”

Through the federally funded Employment Network Program, benefits counselors can help students ensure they stay within SSI requirements, as well as provide post-employment supports.

“At Employment Network we do benefits counseling, we help them get a job, and once they get a job we keep them on, providing ... post-employment services, which means things like upgrading skills or getting a better job, or going for a promotion,” says Younesian. “We help them keep the job they have and maybe do something better.”

Ultimately, the program’s goal is to empower student to thrive in the workplace, something that can’t be achieved without the support of employers willing to hire them.

“A disability doesn’t describe a person,” says Younesian. “When we shift the emphasis away from the disability and we focus on what this person can do, it works better.”

For more information on GlendaleLEARNS and the Verdugo CNC Machinist Academy program, visit www.glendalelearns.org/cncacademy. For more information on Verdugo Jobs Center, visit verdugoworks.com/jobs/ or call 818-937-8000.