

# President's Committee Addresses Unemployment

By Houkje Ross

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Minorities and others from diverse cultural backgrounds with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed than whites with disabilities, according to a July 1999 report from the National Council on Disability. The report, *Lift Every Voice: Modernizing Disability Policies and Programs to Serve a Diverse Nation*, said fear and ignorance on the part of some employers play a part in increasing the likelihood of unemployment for minorities. Some employers consider disabled persons bad for business. And in some cultures, persons with disabilities are considered bearers of bad luck, the report said.

While the labor force participation rate for people age 18 to 64 without disabilities is nearly 83 percent, it is about 52 percent for those with disabilities, and only 38.6 percent for non-Whites with disabilities, according to the report. For people with severe disabilities, the labor force participation rate is roughly 30 percent for Whites, 21.2 percent for Hispanics, and 17.8 percent for African Americans.

## The Cultural Diversity Initiative

To improve the job opportunities for individuals with disabilities, the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities established the Cultural Diversity Initiative in 1986. The Initiative has formed coalitions with other organizations to help minorities with disabilities become employed. The Initiative provides training on disability employment issues and the Americans with Disability Act.

Members of the Cultural Diversity Initiative regularly attend conferences, seminars, and discussion panels of other organizations in order to talk about the issues of unemployment among minorities with disabilities, said Claudie Grant Jr., program manager for the Initiative.

The Cultural Diversity Initiative has formed alliances with three organizations on a high school program working to give minority students with

disabilities a chance at careers in technology and related fields, Grant added. The groups working with the President's Initiative are the NAACP, the National Urban League, and ASPIRA, a nonprofit organization devoted to the education and leadership development of Latino youth. The NAACP will base its project in Baltimore, the National Urban League in Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska, and ASPIRA in Newark, New Jersey.

These organizations will choose between 20 and 25 students from area school systems to participate in the Initiative. Each organization will identify businesses willing to give disabled minority students internships. Chosen students will participate in a high-tech program aimed at preparing them for careers in technology, engineering, science, and computer skills.

These students will participate in "shadow experiences," according to Grant. "They will get to watch others work and in some cases be mentored. The whole idea is to get the students to acquire computer skills and technology skills," Grant added. "The Initiative is working to get these students careers, not just jobs. This is important, because many students with disabilities never get the chance to work," he said.

The organizations have been asked to operate their programs and launch secondary programs with affiliates, Grant said.

*For more information on the Cultural Diversity Initiative, contact the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 202-376-6200, or 202-376-6205 (TDD), or go to its Web site at <http://www.pcepd.gov>.*

## Job Accommodation Network

The President's Committee also operates the Job Accommodation Network (JAN). JAN is an information and consulting service for inquiries about enabling people with disabilities to work.

*For more information, contact JAN at (800) 526-7234 (Voice/TDD), or visit its Web site: <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu>.*

## Why Do Minorities Have Such High Unemployment Rates?

Some factors that contribute to the high unemployment rates of minorities with disabilities, according to the President's Committee, include:

- People with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds experience twice the discrimination experienced by non-disabled people in the minority community. Both disability and race complicate the situation.
- There is disparity in rehabilitation services provided to minorities with disabilities.
- Educational opportunities are less affordable to individuals with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Inadequate transportation and housing in disadvantaged communities intensify the employment barriers for minority people with disabilities.
- There is a lack of mentors and role models for minority individuals with disabilities in the workplace.
- Mainstream job coaching, on-the-job training and internships are often not readily available to minority individuals with disabilities.
- Both mainstream and minority communities and religious organizations tend to overlook their capability to support the employment of minority individuals with disabilities.
- Cultural differences are not clearly understood by individuals or organizations designing programs to support the employment of minorities with disabilities. ❖

