



Highlights of [GAO-07-934SP](#), a GAO forum.

Why GAO Convened This Forum

Economic, medical, technological, and social changes have increased opportunities for persons with disabilities to live with greater independence and more fully participate in the workforce. In addition, social and legal changes have promoted the goal of greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in the mainstream of society. However, GAO's reviews of the largest federal disability programs indicate that such programs have not evolved in line with these larger societal changes and, therefore, are poorly positioned to provide meaningful and timely support for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, program enrollment and costs for the largest federal disability programs have been growing and are poised to grow even more rapidly in the future. For these reasons, GAO added modernizing federal disability to its high-risk areas in January 2003.

GAO convened this forum to address some of the key issues related to modernizing federal disability policy. The forum brought together a diverse array of experts, including employers; advocate groups, researchers, and academia; and federal officials. Comments expressed do not necessarily represent the views of any individual participant or the organizations they represent, including GAO. However, GAO does make some concluding observations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-934SP.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Schinas at (202) 512-4841 or schinasik@gao.gov.

HIGHLIGHTS OF A GAO FORUM

Modernizing Federal Disability Policy

What Participants Said

Forum participants were asked to discuss over three sessions, what's working well and what needs to be improved in federal disability programs, how to strengthen partnerships and coordination for modernizing programs, and ways to modernize measures of program success. Participants also considered the next steps to achieving a 21st century disability policy.

(1) What's Working Well and What Needs Improvement?

- Some partnerships and collaborations are helping to improve services such as income replacement, health care, and work assistance, as well as research on disability issues.
- There is no federal system for disability that coordinates the many different disability programs and services, and no comprehensive lifetime picture of the needs of individuals with disabilities.

(2) Strengthening Partnerships and Coordination

- More coordination and leadership of disability programs are needed.
- Partnerships with and incentives for the private sector are needed to offer and maintain employment for individuals with disabilities.
- States and localities are key partners in delivering services to individuals with disabilities.

(3) Modernizing Measures of Success

- Disability populations and definitions vary.
- Data collection on people with disabilities needs to be improved.
- Multiple indicators are needed to measure economic success as well as quality of life for people with different disabilities.

Participants suggested a number of steps that could be taken by stakeholders to inform the debate to help move current policy toward achieving a 21st century disability policy. Some participants suggested evaluating work incentives and disincentives and the coordination efforts between public and private sector disability entities; others suggested developing a definition of disability and standard language that could be shared across related programs; and many suggested establishing various program outcome indicators and data reporting requirements to track them.

Concluding Observations

To the extent that federal disability programs are aligned with 21st century realities, benefits can be achieved for individuals with disabilities, business, and government. Solutions are likely to require fundamental changes, including regulatory and legislative action. Without federal leadership at this critical time to lead this transformation, there could be fewer options in the future available to policymakers seeking to improve federal disability programs. As the country moves forward, the fiscal implications of any new actions—as well as the cost of keeping the status quo—must be considered.