

# Austin American-Statesman

**TWC aims to expand job opportunities for disabled workforce**



Lex Frieden, a Houston resident, is considered an “architect” of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the namesake of an award given to those who further opportunities for the disabled in Texas. LBJ LIBRARY

As signs of a healthy job market continue to grow on the national stage, Texas officials are turning their attention to a historically under-served workforce here at home.

While the rhetoric surrounding the U.S. economy — and the jobs contained within — has reached a fever pitch on the presidential campaign trail, with some seeing doom for the U.S. worker, a fairly significant milestone has been passed that might have gone unnoticed under the cacophony of politics.

On Oct. 6, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) released figures showing an 83-week streak of new jobless claims hovering under 300,000. This marks the longest such period of that level of joblessness since 1970. Most significantly, the labor force in the U.S. was about half of what it is now back then.

Additionally, the four-week moving average (as of the week ending Oct. 1) was 253,500, a drop of 2,500 from the prior week. This too was significant, as it was the lowest of all such averages since 1973.

Overall, that signals a job market that is healthier than many expected, and job growth that has continued to keep up with the expansion of the labor market.

On the home front, Texas officials are expanding their efforts at improving employment opportunities for disabled workers, who often find navigating the job market a more challenging task than most.

According to the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), there are an estimated 82,000 Texans with disabilities currently seeking work. There are 1.6 million Texans of working age with one or more disabilities, 420,000 of which (age 25 or older) hold at least a bachelor's degree.

The TWC, in partnership with the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities and Texas Workforce Solutions, has launched the "Texas HireAbility" campaign in an effort to raise awareness about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. The campaign was launched to coincide with National Disability Employment Awareness Month to highlight the contributions and workforce potential of people with disabilities.

"Employers are always looking for innovative ways to expand their businesses by hiring skilled workers," TWC Commissioner Representing Employers Ruth Hughs said. "Through the Texas HireAbility campaign, employers will have access to additional resources to help them connect with this segment of the workforce."

Gov. Greg Abbott issued a proclamation declaring October Disability Employment Awareness Month in Texas as part of the initiative. The Texas HireAbility campaign takes a two-pronged approach, informing potential employers of the benefits of hiring the disabled and providing special resources to disabled workers themselves.

"Businesses which hire employees with disabilities report increased employee retention, less absenteeism, and equal or increased productivity," the TWC said in an informational brochure to be presented to employers. "Free technical assistance to help you fill open positions, recruit, train, address barriers and accommodate employees with disabilities is available through Texas Workforce Solutions – Vocational Rehabilitation Business Services."

In addition, some benefits that disabled workers bring to the table are less tangible in nature.

"I actually think in some ways having a disability and the experiences of having a disability and needing to problem-solve and be adaptable translate really well into the workplace," said Michelle Colvard, a research compliance officer in the health care industry and spokeswoman for the Texas Hire-Ability campaign.

In addition to providing resources on the Texas HireAbility website ([TXHireAbility.texasworkforce.org](http://TXHireAbility.texasworkforce.org)), there are numerous public events scheduled throughout the state this month to further job opportunities for the disabled.

“We are proud to kick off the Texas HireAbility campaign to connect the significant skills and abilities of people with disabilities with opportunities created by Texas employers,” said TWC Chairman Andres Alcantar. “Through this campaign, employers will better connect to these valuable workers to meet their workforce needs.”

To that end, Abbott is also taking the time to recognize those who already have contributed to this effort in the Lone Star State.

On Oct. 7, Abbott announced seven individuals and companies who were chosen for the 2016 Lex Frieden Awards for commitment to furthering employment opportunities for Texans with disabilities. Abbott, who uses a wheelchair himself, said the awards would be presented to the recipients at a special luncheon on Oct. 27.

Frieden, a resident of Houston, is known as an “architect” of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has been credited with making great strides in opening new doors for the physically impaired in the U.S. in terms of employment, personal freedom and upward mobility.

“This year’s award recipients have been inspirational in providing opportunity for all Texans to thrive in the workplace,” Abbott said. “Their dedicated service is a powerful reminder that we are not defined by life’s challenges — we are defined by how we respond to those challenges. Each of our honorees has risen to the challenges set before them and helped build a brighter future for their fellow Texans.”

The recipients for this year’s awards include David Myers, director (retired), Office for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services and Texas Commission for the Deaf; Jason Shaw, Blue Paw Energy Service (Austin); CyraCom (Houston); Starbucks (Houston Heights); Howdy Homemade (Dallas); Texas Rush Soccer Club (Houston); and Camp SURGE (Grayson County College).

“Employers move to Texas because of our strong and diverse workforce,” TWC Commissioner Representing Labor Julian Alvarez said. “I encourage all Texans to celebrate the contributions of workers with disabilities and to support Texas’ commitment to workforce diversity this October and beyond.”

Gov. Greg Abbott declared October Disability Employment Awareness month in Texas.



## **Workforce Solutions Borderplex Celebrates HIREAbility Month**

During the month of October, Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) and its partners at the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities will promote employment opportunities for Texans who possess significant knowledge and skills and also have a disability.

The Texas HireAbility campaign recently launched in conjunction with National Disability Employment Awareness Month to raise awareness of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

As part of the statewide and national effort, WSB would like to remind employers and job seekers in the counties of Brewster, Culberson, El Paso, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis and Presidio that there are resources dedicated and available to people with disabilities.

WSB has an unprecedented ten years of experience instituting programs, developed with oversight from the only formal Disability Advocacy Subcommittee among the 28 regional workforce boards in Texas, that provide equality of opportunity. This includes nondiscrimination, individualization, and inclusion/integration activities.

In 2015, this strategy helped WSB place 1127 persons self-identified with a disability in employment, including 483 veterans and 54 youth.

This week, WSB will host the Ability Hiring Fair on Wednesday, October 12th from 9:00a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at 8825 N. Loop, Suite 122. The event will offer the following workshops: Hiring & Retaining Individuals with Disabilities; Interview Accommodations; Practice Interviews Specifically for Individuals with Disabilities; and Benefits to Businesses that Employ Individuals with Disabilities.

Job seekers can call (915) 887-2600 for more information and businesses interested in participating should contact the WSB business service unit at (915) 887-2332.

WSB leads by example by contracting with Ready One Industries. Ready One employs individuals with significant disabilities and delivers high quality call center and document management services to WSB. Most notably, WSB after-hours call center includes three highly capable individuals with disabilities.

Goodwill Industries of El Paso is a recent addition to the WSB service network. Goodwill was sub -contracted due to their 62 years of expertise in training and employing individuals with

significant barriers to employment. Goodwill continues to have a presence in WSB resource centers and institute WSB/Goodwill's Job Link Centers to further extend access to universal services.

"The benefits to partners involved and the disability and employer communities are critical in breaking down barriers and eliminating disability myths," said Joyce Wilson, CEO of Workforce Solutions Borderplex.

The Breaking Barriers summer youth with disabilities program works in collaboration with key organizations that serve the disabled. In El Paso, the Volar Center for Independent Living and the Texas Vocational Rehabilitative Services Agency (VRS), and Workforce Solutions Borderplex worked to collaborate for ten years on the unique partnership which leverages resources and provides a seamless project model.

During its lifetime, Breaking Barriers has served more than 350 youth and 150 employers. This year's Breaking Barriers Summer Employment Ceremony will take place at Region 19 located on 6611 Boeing Drive on Wednesday, October 19, 2016. Registration starts at 5:30p.m. The media is invited to cover this event.

Employers are encouraged to find more information about hiring jobseekers with disabilities at [TxHireAbility.texasworkforce.org](http://TxHireAbility.texasworkforce.org).

# Longview News-Journal

## Forums link disabled with employer

Most people with disabilities don't just want to work, they are eager for that feeling of being part of society that comes with a job.

That's a premise of a series of monthly forums taking shape to bring employers together with people who want to explain their lives more fully together.

"Research has shown that people with disabilities are extremely loyal to their employers," said Stanley Williams, managing director for integrated health operations at Community HealthCore, the mental health authority that serves 23 Northeast Texas communities.

An initial meeting on Oct. 11 drew the Longview representative for the Texas Workforce Commission, counselors and members of a peer-to-peer life skills program and about 10 other people with disabilities.

Participants learned, from the people who live with disabilities, about barriers to a successful employer/employee connection such as applicants' reluctance to disclose a disability.

"They shared about, not only how society deals with them, but how their families do," Williams said. "Because, if people aren't working, sometimes people see them without value."

People with disabilities often receive disability payments through Medicare. It doesn't replace a job.

"It's more than money for them," said Williams, whose doctoral dissertation was a two-year study of the barriers to employment faced by a dozen people with "lived experiences."

"Physical, mental, emotional, developmental disabilities — all of that," he said. "For people that work, it has value to them in society. They feel embarrassed, because they can't be part of society."

Williams hopes local employers will join the mix at the second forum, at 9 a.m. Nov. 1, in the Community Connections building at 501 Pine Tree Road in Longview.

"We would love for employers to send their people, just for them to learn and for us to collaborate," Williams said. "People with disabilities are a population that doesn't tell people what their experience is — they don't protest. When they share, it's really eye-opening for people."

Large outfits generally have institutional programs in place to hire and accommodate people challenged by disability. Williams said it's the smaller, local jobs that his clients find elusive.

"I don't think employers intentionally are biased," he said. "I think because they haven't had interaction with people with disabilities they don't know, a lot of times, what they are doing and the impact it is having."

Williams acknowledged employers are wary of a potential minefield if they step onto Americans with Disabilities Act ground. He hopes attending the forum will put them on firmer footing, including on the Act's requirement of "reasonable accommodations" for people with disabilities.

One participant in this month's forum said she needs an hourly break to take her anxiety medications, he said.

"I think employers are concerned about, 'What are my costs from A.D.A.?' If the employers know how committed, how they will be on time to work every time and how they desire to just please their employers — there are a lot of those things."

Williams said the forums were created to establish a two-way dialogue between employers and people with an array of disabilities.

"We believe that if the humble voices of people with disabilities are heard — and accepted regarding their challenges and oppressions with attaining employment due to appearing different — new knowledge would emerge concerning tolerance and acceptance that would benefit not only people with disabilities, but all human beings."

## **San Antonio Express-News**

### **Hiring people with disabilities can help companies**

The first time hiring manager Isabelle Berry had to interview a visually impaired job candidate, she panicked.

Berry works for Marriott Global Reservations in San Antonio, whose employees mainly take hotel reservations while working in front of computer screens.

After receiving assurances that she should focus "on ability, not visibility," the applicant was hired. The action turned out to be a smart move for the company.

A system change was established so that the worker could use his tab key to move through the on-screen reservations form. He completed reservations faster than other employees who using

their mouse to point and click at each on-screen form box. Soon, everyone else was using the tab keys instead.

Hiring people with disabilities is not something to be afraid of, Berry said during a workshop presentation held recently by the Business Services unit of Workforce Solutions Alamo.

San Antonio-based H-E-B has worked for years with the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services, now renamed Texas Workforce Solutions after it became a department of the Texas Workforce Commission. H-E-B's Abilities Workforce Initiative program to hire people with disabilities is spreading to more stores in the grocery chain, said Sonia Canales, the program's diversity and inclusion manager.

H-E-B is hiring people with disabilities for jobs ranging from baggers to perishables representatives, the people making sure sufficient produce is on the shelves. Canales described H-E-B's employees with disabilities as "committed and loyal."

David Uro, a human resources employee of Lowe's Home Improvement, gave an example during the workshop of a Canada employee with a brain injury. "His self-esteem grew. He felt like he was part of something. We changed his life overnight," Uro said. "It's amazing what can be done when you look at someone and their 'hireability.'"

"The courage and ability these people have. They have a lot to teach us," marveled Marriott Global Reservations' Berry said. "Everybody wants a dedicated workforce. I guarantee you can get that with people with disabilities."

One in five people have some kind of disability, according to the 2010 census. And one-third of hiring managers say employees with disabilities stay on their jobs longer, according to Workforce Solutions Alamo.

About 82,000 Texans with disabilities age 18 to 64 currently are seeking employment. About 420,000 Texas with disabilities aged 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher.

It costs nothing for a company to accommodate an employee with a disability 59 percent of the time. When there are costs, it's usually \$500 or less.

Hiring people with disabilities usually makes a company look good to its customers. But what some companies may not yet know is that equal opportunity laws require certain employers to increase their hiring of people with disabilities.

In 2014, a new rule under the federal 1973 Rehabilitation Act went into effect requiring federal contractors and subcontractors to dedicate at least 7 percent of their workforce to people with

disabilities. Contractors must show progress toward reaching that goal to get certified by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs.

Contractors needing to comply can find help from Workforce Solutions Alamo's Business Services unit under the Texas Workforce Solution's Vocational Rehabilitation Services program.

Another widely known source of help is the San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind & Vision Impaired, which prepares people with low vision for careers and the ability to get to and from work. The San Antonio Lighthouse also is a contract manufacturing facility employing the blind and vision-impaired.

Bryan Baldwin, an employment assistance specialist in the blind services division of the Vocational Rehabilitation Service program, discussed the emerging technologies that assist vision-impaired workers in job functions, including verbal walking guides on cell phones.

Baldwin, who is vision impaired, said it takes "a well-prepared business culture" at companies to hire people with disabilities. A company's recruitment process must be inclusive and the employment application process must be accessible. Companies also must be open and flexible with employment screening and interviewing and in preparing the workers for their jobs and retaining them.

"If you are looking for someone to come in and do a good job, they will stick with you," Baldwin said.

Companies do not have to be federal contractors to find out that hiring people with disabilities equals good business.