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## **A Wisconsin for Everyone**

*By Delora Newton*

In the U.S., nearly 20 percent of people with disabilities ages 25-34 don't complete high school. That's compared to less than 9 percent of their peers without disabilities per the 2017 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium. Likewise, less than 15 percent of people with disabilities earn a bachelor's degree or more, compared to nearly 35 percent of their peers without disabilities per the Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey. These statistics closely mirror those here in Wisconsin.

At the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), working to narrow this gap is a key strategy we employ to carry out our mission to help individuals with disabilities find a job, keep a job, or get a better job.

DVR works with individuals of all ages, with one focus area targeting high school students with disabilities. DVR works to transition students into the workforce by helping them gain the skills, education, and work experiences needed to get them started in the career pathway of their choice.

A national study on Predictors of Postschool Employment Outcomes for Young Adults with Severe Disabilities from the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* found that the likelihood of students with disabilities working as adults more than doubled if they had meaningful, dignified, paid work experiences while in high school. Two programs here in Wisconsin, Project SEARCH and Wisconsin Promise, focus on youth and have proven successful in connecting students and young people with disabilities to employment.

Project SEARCH is a nine- to 12-month program that provides training and education leading to integrated employment for youth with disabilities. Developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital in 1996, Project SEARCH is now offered at over 600 sites in the US and abroad. DVR, in partnership with other state, local, and private entities, operates 27 Project SEARCH sites throughout Wisconsin. More than 650 students have successfully completed the program since 2008, and over 230 additional participants are set to complete their internships this spring. Nationally, about 70 percent of Project SEARCH interns receive employment offers at the end of each year. Wisconsin is a national leader in Project SEARCH, achieving an 88 percent employment rate for program graduates statewide.

Wisconsin Promise, funded through a five-year federal grant, provided employment and training services to youth receiving SSI and their families. Although the grant ended in 2018, several key take-aways have demonstrated that focused services and coordination with local school resources make a big difference in employment outcomes. Promise showed that youth have higher employment rates when they and their families have higher expectations about what is possible to achieve after high school and receive training on how to access needed resources and services.

Gov. Evers' administration is striving to create a Wisconsin that works for everyone. In fact, the Governor is requesting an additional \$600 million dollars to fund special education in Wisconsin. Increased funding for special education will help provide students with disabilities the solid foundation they need to successfully transition into the workforce. Adding more students with disabilities to the workforce will not only help them achieve financial independence and provide a better quality of life, it will help the state's overall economy as they contribute their skills and abilities to the workforce.

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