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Recession's Bite Hits Americans With Disabilities Extra Hard They "tend to be the last hired and first fired," says one advocate

By Amanda Ruggeri

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The recession's crunch on jobs, wallets, and egos is hitting one group of Americans—those with disabilities—particularly hard.

"People with disabilities tend to be the last hired and the first fired," says Rick Diamond, director of employment services at Disability Network/Lakeshore, a disability rights nonprofit based in Holland, Mich.

Advocates nationwide say they've seen a sharp increase in the number of their clients who have been laid off. And if data from 2007—as well as from previous recessions—holds true for this year, people with disabilities will be cut from their jobs at a rate disproportionate to that of nondisabled workers.

Nationwide belt-tightening has other implications, too. Government funding cuts, decreased revenue in the private sector, and smaller family budgets mean that programs and projects that help people with disabilities are at risk.

The disparity in employment between people with and without disabilities has already been growing. In 2007, according to last month's Disability Status Report, only 36.9 percent of working-age individuals with disabilities were employed. The year before, it was 37.7 percent. But the employment rate of people without disabilities, at 79.7 percent, didn't change.

If past recessions are any sign, that disparity between those with and without disabilities will increase. From 1989 to 1992, working-age men without disabilities saw a 1.4 percentage point drop in employment; for men with disabilities, the decline was 5.5 percentage points. For women, the disparity was more than twice the size, at 9.6 percentage points.

Advocates are seeing that gap firsthand. About half of the people that Disability Network/Lakeshore helped place in jobs over the past two years have been laid off in the past two months. When asked what that would have been three years ago, Diamond stops to think. "I'd say maybe one in—maybe one in—oh gosh, maybe one in 10," he says.

One poster child of this is a client of PRIDE Industries, a company in the Sacramento, Calif., area that employs people with disabilities and helps place others in private companies. The man had worked for eight years as a fork lift driver. Then the building industry downturn hit. "He's the first person out the door," says Mike Ziegler, the president and CEO of PRIDE, which ended up hiring the man.

Losing a job is difficult for anyone. But for workers with disabilities, the effects can be particularly acute. In 2007, nearly one in 4 working-age individuals with disabilities were below the poverty line. But fewer than one in 10 people without disabilities were.

But as people with disabilities tend to work more often than other Americans in jobs that are part time or lower paid, a job is not necessarily enough to stave off poverty. Diamond says that one of his coworkers has noted that of her 70 client cases, 15 of them are both employed and homeless. "Three years ago, I would have said I'm not aware of anyone in those circumstances," Diamond says.

But even the groups that work to help people with disabilities are struggling. Already-tightened state and federal budgets are expected to force cuts next year. And, as in other recessions, some organizations are finding private donations down from past years.

For nonprofit Teri, Inc., which provides 10 residential facilities, three schools, in-home care, and other services to 600 people with learning and developmental disabilities in the San Diego area, fiscal issues almost closed them down.

Federal money accounts for 90 percent of its funding, says Laura White, director of development for Teri. This year, it has decreased by 6 percent; a further 3 percent cut is expected next year. Legacy gifts—the private, typically large donations from trusts, wills, and other sources—are down 25 percent.

And so, when the California budget was stymied for nearly three months this fall, halting a key source of funding, the nonprofit was in trouble. To ensure that clients could still get

healthcare and staff their average wage of \$11.50 an hour, Teri took out a \$500,000 loan. Although the state is responsible for it, Teri has to pay \$9,000 in interest.

But at least they could stay open.

"We got down to the point where we had to actually send out notices to our clients, to our families, that said, if that budget doesn't get signed by a particular Friday—it was a Friday in October—we will be closing our doors on Monday. We do not have the funds to go beyond this week," White says. "The governor wound up signing that Friday."

Meanwhile, for companies whose primary goal is simply to stay in the black, projects aimed to help people with disabilities may get left behind. One convenience store the Disability Network/Lakeshore was working with to make its building more accessible, for example, planned to install an automatic door opener. But with sales down 50 percent, they've had to put it off.

All of those hurdles are leading to another trend that worries Diamond.

"I can't think of a person now with a physical disability, literally today, that I'm working with, who isn't also struggling with depression," he says.

**Read more from Amanda Ruggeri.*

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