

Massachusetts Career Centers: Best Practices in Accessibility for Customers with Disabilities

By David Hoff, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston

Massachusetts One-Stop Career Centers are designed for high customer volume, meeting the needs of a broad range of job seekers. Approximately 6% of individuals who use these Career Centers identify as having a disability—significantly above the national average. Given that many people choose not to disclose their disability, the actual percentage is probably much higher.

With such a major portion of Career Center customers having disabilities, it is important to use a variety of strategies to meet their specific needs. Since the inception of the Massachusetts One-Stop Career Center system in the 1990s, Career Centers have undertaken a multitude of efforts to enhance accessibility. Many of these efforts have been done in conjunction with local Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission offices, Independent Living Centers, and other state and local disability entities. The following are keys to the success of such efforts:

- Have a checklist. In reviewing Career Center accessibility, a written checklist can help ensure that the review is comprehensive. A number of checklists specifically for Career Centers exist (see links in the Resources section).
- Focus on both physical and programmatic access. In reviewing access for people with disabilities, there is often an emphasis on physical access (e.g., ramps, accessible restrooms, parking, etc.). While this is important for some people with disabilities (such as individuals who use wheelchairs), for others, including those with learning disabilities and mental health issues, the more critical issue is programmatic and service access (i.e., the ability to fully utilize One-Stop services such as workshops, the resource library, and partner services).
- Use a universal design approach. Accessibility efforts should not be focused simply on compliance with legal requirements, though these provide an important baseline. The real focus should be on continually enhancing the overall user-friendliness of services for all Career Center customers—including those with

disabilities. An effective approach in this regard is the use of “universal design.” This means using common strategies that benefit many groups, and that reinforce the concept of an inclusive setting that welcomes and celebrates diversity. The Resources section lists a guide to using universal design strategies in One-Stop Career Centers.

- Make accessibility part of quality improvement. Career Centers can incorporate accessibility for customers with disabilities into their ongoing general quality-improvement efforts, such as customer surveys, focus groups, and annual planning initiatives. As with all quality-improvement efforts, enhancing accessibility is never really completed, and new strategies and improvements can always be made.
- Conduct annual reviews. Conducting a comprehensive review of accessibility on an annual basis, and comparing the results to previous reviews, can help not only to ensure that progress is being made in improving accessibility, but also that previous improvements have been maintained. Reviews also help in identifying future areas for improvement.
- Incorporate accessibility into ongoing staff development. Training of Career Center staff is a key component of accessibility. It is useful to incorporate training of staff on accessibility issues into ongoing staff-development efforts. Disability trainings that include representatives from various disability groups have been shown to significantly increase staff members’ comfort levels and confidence about meeting the specific needs of customers with disabilities.
- Involve disability partners. In examining accessibility, it

Work Without Limits is a public/private partnership that brings together people with disabilities, family members, policy researchers, policy makers, service planners, employment service providers, employers, and other stakeholders to maximize work opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities, address the needs of employers, and strengthen the Massachusetts workforce.

is useful to have a variety of disability perspectives represented (e.g., a group representing individuals who are blind and visually impaired will have different considerations from a group representing individuals with mental health issues, or learning disabilities). The expertise of such entities is of great assistance in identifying areas for access improvement and in developing solutions. Many Career Centers in Massachusetts have advisory boards that meet on an ongoing basis to address accessibility issues. Including people with disabilities from diverse ethnic and linguistic cultures can enhance this process and ensure that the Career Center is being fully responsive to the diversity of customer needs.

- Use national experts. In addition to local experts, national experts on access and accommodation issues can also be of assistance in interpreting requirements and finding solutions. A link to a listing of these national resources is contained in the Resources section.
- Understand legal requirements. There are specific legal requirements, spelled out under Section 188 of the Workforce Investment Act, that One-Stop Career Centers must comply with regarding accessibility for people with disabilities. As part of efforts to enhance Career Center accessibility, it is important to understand these legal requirements. Even if someone is a disability expert, he or she may not have an understanding of the specific accessibility requirements for Career Centers. (The Resources section contains links to information on this topic.) Bear in mind that there are many ways to meet the requirements for equal access and non-discrimination. For example, there is no legal requirement that a Career Center supply a sign language interpreter for a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. Instead, what is required is “equally effective communication,” which can be accomplished in a multitude of ways, including using a sign language interpreter. Similarly, if an individual has a learning disability that requires that documents be verbally read to them, they do not need a staff person to read the documents, if those

documents can be accessed via the voice output mechanism on a computer.

At the core of enhancing One-Stop accessibility is the recognition that issues can be addressed in an atmosphere of mutual respect between Career Centers and the disability community. This includes recognition of the following:

- Career Centers in Massachusetts must respond to an incredible diversity of needs on a daily basis in a system that provides universal access to over 200,000 customers annually.
- People with disabilities are among the core customer groups that Career Centers work with, and have the right to full access to all services that are available.
- Enhancement to accessibility is a continuous, ongoing process.
- Addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities will enable Career Centers to improve services for all customers.

Resources

Publication

One-Stop System: Legal Guidelines & Requirements for Serving People with Disabilities

www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=384

Checklists

- Section 188 of the Workforce Investment Act contains the equal opportunity and nondiscrimination provisions. This checklist was designed to ensure compliance with these requirements and provides a variety of strategies for doing so.
www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/crc/section188.htm
- One-Stop Career Center Service Accessibility Checklist
www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=16
- One-Stop Career Center Facilities Checklist
www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=15
- Universal Access Strategies Checklist
www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article_id=268

Resources and Experts

- Access for All: A Resource Manual for Meeting the Needs of One-Stop Customers with Disabilities. Section 14 of this manual contains a listing of national resources on disability issues.
www.communityinclusion.org/onestop/onestopmanual.html
- General Disability Resources - www.disabilityresources.org
- New England Index Information on Disabilities Exchange - www.disabilityinfo.org

Suggested Citation: Hoff, D. 2011. MA Career Centers: Best Practices in Accessibility for Customers with Disabilities: Boston, MA: Institute for Community Inclusion/UMass Boston



Center for Health Policy and Research
333 South Street
Shrewsbury, MA 01545

WorkWithoutLimits

Putting abilities to work in Massachusetts.

Work Without Limits, a Massachusetts Disability Employment Initiative, is made possible by a federal grant to UMass Medical School, funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CFDA No. 93.768).