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Guest Columns

Include people with disabilities in apprenticeship programs

By Robert Stack / President & CEO, Community Options

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President Donald Trump's executive order expanding apprenticeships in America will have an impact on workforce development. It could have an even a greater impact if students with disabilities are included.

Trump said, "... Nobody has gotten rid of so many regulations as the Trump administration." The president needs to direct relevant Cabinet members and his staff to reduce regulations that are excluding students with disabilities from an apprenticeship program.

The focus of special education has been on impractical applications for students with disabilities to take subjects that will never help them to become employed. Today, when a student with disabilities turns 21, they are either placed on a 10-year wait list, pushed into a workshop compensated below minimum wage, or just left to sit idly at home with their parents with nothing to do at all.

Students with disabilities can work easily in any service industry. Baby boomers will pay for services to augment their needs.

Georgetown University Center projects a combination of 31 million baby boomers leaving the workforce with 24 million newly created jobs means 55 million job openings within the next three years. People remaining in traditional types of skilled work will not meet this demand.

The Census Bureau estimates that nearly one of every five people in the United States has a disability – 65 million people. Yet in 2016, only 17.9 percent, or 11.64 million, of people with a disability were employed. The labor shortage is more than a potential crisis. Advocates for people with disabilities have a solution.

The president knows that anyone who wants to work can, and should be able to, work. Americans with disabilities should be no exception: they want to work. Yet data from the National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes continues to show the significant disparities in employment rates, mean annual earnings and poverty rates between people with and without disabilities.

People with disabilities struggle in the workforce from a lack of appropriate preparation, programming and services ensuring new workers have adequate training and confidence to successfully enter and remain gainfully employed. Evidence also shows that social stereotypes and prejudices on the part of employers continue to cause people with disabilities to be excluded from the workforce. A system of apprenticeships would resolve both of the key barriers that prevent citizens with disabilities from excelling in the workforce.

Apprenticeship programs remain a vital and valuable way to create pathways to well-paying careers for the underemployed. Students with disabilities can be placed directly into jobs before they are adults and become a worker pipeline with customized skills for relevant business needs. This will increase employee retention and reduce unnecessary expenses. Through a combination of classroom-based education and hands-on training, apprentices not only learn the specifics of a job, but also become experts.

Students with disabilities who need assistance in finding and retaining employment are faced with two barriers: the necessity of structured and extensive hands-on training for the potential employee and overcoming the stereotypes of employers. The apprenticeship model is the solution to both of these confounding issues.

The apprenticeship model generally includes 200 hours of on-the-job learning with employers typically paying 50 to 60 percent less in wages for the novice employee. The employee has the necessary time to adjust and rise to the demands, expectations and outcomes of the position. The employer has time to adjust to the apprentice

with disabilities. The needs of one naturally complement the other.

The president's executive order is an opportunity to solve two challenging workforce dilemmas with one solution. Through the expansion of apprenticeship programs, it is possible to create a pathway to employment for people with disabilities while addressing the imminent labor shortage.

Community Options is a nonprofit organization helping thousands of persons with disabilities nationwide. Stack is based in Albuquerque.