

NextSTEP

National Service To Employment Project

The National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) conducts research, provides technical assistance, and creates demonstration projects focusing on people with disabilities in volunteer and community-service roles. Funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), NextSTEP strives to identify effective practices and promote service as a step towards improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities. CNCS provides opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to engage in structured service programs around specific community needs through its three major programs: AmeriCorps (including AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps NCCC), Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America.

Volunteering and engaging in community service—for volunteers both with and without disabilities—are effective avenues for personal and professional development. Service participants actively contribute to the strengthening of their communities, while at the same time gaining valuable skills, exploring career paths, and developing social networks that can lead to meaningful employment. For people who have had limited vocational experience, national service can be an important training option and part of a long-range employment plan.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act was intended to create equality and opportunity within the workplace, many people with disabilities lack access to traditional forms of skill building which lead to employment. Participating in national service or other volunteer programs provides an opportunity to learn new skills or relearn old skills in a new way. Volunteering can expand an individual's life options, including improving his or her employment outcomes. Completing a structured service experience allows people with disabilities to develop their vocational and interpersonal skills while giving back to their communities.

NextSTEP's focus is on promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities in service and understanding how participation in service leads to meaningful employment and post-secondary options through the following activities:

- Identifying promising practices in service that lead to employment and post-secondary activities. Information is being collected through existing literature, and through interviews with service commissions, program staff, and alumni with disabilities.
- Working with state intellectual/developmental disability agencies and vocational rehabilitation agencies to support participation in service as part of vocational development for their customers. This includes identifying any policies or practice

barriers that might exist, and disseminating state models of effective practice for replication.

- Defining key elements that contribute to service experiences that improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities transitioning from high school.
- Informing employers about the value that the service experience can bring to their companies and the contribution of candidates who have service experience. Employers will also provide information on how potential employees can capitalize on their service experience during the hiring process.

Based on information gathered from these activities, NextSTEP will integrate material about how service contributes to employment and post-secondary options into existing training content for service volunteers. Thus, these concepts become part of the overall service experience rather than a stand-alone activity. NextSTEP seeks to inform schools, community providers, people with disabilities, and their families about the value of national service as a step toward meaningful employment.

The National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) is a collaboration of the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at UMass Boston; Center for Technical Assistance and Training (CTAT) at Denver Options; the Start on Success program at the National Organization on Disability the State Employment Leadership Network of the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the ICI; and the US Business Leadership Network.

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