



Highlights of [GAO-10-812SP](#), a GAO forum

## Why GAO Convened This Forum

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year—calls for the full participation of individuals with disabilities in society, including the workforce. Yet, many barriers exist that may prevent them from staying connected or returning to employment. For instance, eligibility requirements for receiving public disability benefits or health coverage are not always consistent with helping to keep individuals at work or facilitating their return. Also, employers may not know how to accommodate employees with disabilities or may lack financial incentives to do so.

GAO convened a forum on March 16, 2010, to explore policy options and actions that could be taken to help adults with a current or past work history improve their participation in the workforce. Participants included experts and officials representing a variety of views. Prior to the forum, GAO surveyed a larger group of experts to help inform the discussion. Comments expressed during the forum or on the survey do not necessarily represent the views of all participants, the organizations they represent, or GAO.

Although GAO is not making recommendations, based on our prior work and consistent with a past GAO proposal to Congress, GAO agrees with forum participants that strong federal leadership is essential for achieving the level of coordination required to effectively leverage resources to improve work participation for Americans with disabilities.

View [GAO-10-812SP](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

## HIGHLIGHTS OF A FORUM

### Actions that Could Increase Work Participation for Adults with Disabilities

#### What Participants Said

From the policy options identified through two surveys and discussions at a 1-day forum, participants prioritized the following actions for improving work outcomes at three levels: individual, employer, and federal.

**Individual:** Participants articulated a key underlying principle for increasing work participation—improve incentives for individuals with disabilities to work while strengthening necessary services and supports. Participants generally agreed that a more coordinated system of programs and benefits is needed to encourage individuals to work and remove the structural barriers that can jeopardize the services and supports they depend on. They also noted that an increased emphasis on benefits counselors could be useful in helping individuals coordinate the services they receive. However, participants cautioned that any new approaches should be structured to avoid unintended consequences, such as adversely affecting those who cannot work or have yet to enter the workforce.

**Employer:** Participants focused on two proposed actions to further engage and encourage employers in helping individuals with disabilities keep their jobs or return to work. The first involved creating a well-structured information campaign to educate employers about the benefits of keeping employees with disabilities at work or helping them return to work. This campaign would include information about the financial benefits of retaining these employees, as well as narratives from companies who have been successful in doing so. Participants emphasized the importance of disseminating information through a variety of media outlets and involving the disability and business communities in the process of developing the campaign. The second action involved enhancing incentives for employers to keep or return individuals to work by increasing their responsibility for some of the long-term costs of disability. This could be done either by requiring employers to directly finance extended disability benefits for their employees or by adjusting employers' payroll taxes based on their success at keeping employees in the workforce. Ideally, both actions would motivate employers to increase their use of services and practices that proactively address potentially disabling conditions and reintroduce individuals to the workplace.

**Federal:** To address the actions proposed above, or other broad policy options, participants agreed that a federal coordinating entity is needed to focus and align efforts across numerous federal agencies and programs that play a role in supporting individuals with disabilities. They noted that to be effective, interagency efforts would need strong support from the White House; and to ensure legitimacy, a coordinating entity would need representation from the disability community. Participants also suggested that the federal government could do more to serve as a model employer of individuals with disabilities and that more research is needed on hiring practices and retention levels of individuals with disabilities within the federal workforce.