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Unemployment has hit the disabled harder than most

Unemployment rate was 16.9 percent in August

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The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is growing at a faster pace than joblessness in the overall population, making what once was a tough feat -- finding a job as a disabled person -- even more daunting in today's economy.

Unemployment for disabled Americans jumped to 16.9 percent in August up from 15.1 percent in July, the most recent statistics available. Overall unemployment rose from 9.4 percent to 9.7 percent during the same period, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since April, unemployment among disabled Americans seeking jobs has increased 4 percent, up from 12.9.

Larry Wells, 59, is feeling the pressure. He took early retirement from the Department of Defense a decade ago, but the economy has forced him to start looking for work again.

"I'm not getting anywhere -- not too many responses from employers," said Wells, who is training at Easter Seals Crossroads to hone his computer and communication skills. He has had three interviews so far with no job offers and attributes it to the seizure disorder that slows his speech.

"Because of my problems, I sometimes answer questions slowly," he said. "Sometimes people may think I'm a little slow, which I am not."

Wells doesn't like to think he is being discriminated against because of his disability, but it is a reality that some disabled workers face, said Bruce Schnaith, director of the employment division at Easter Seals.

"There's the human nature factor. In a perfect world, there is no discrimination," Schnaith said. "But there are still employers out there for whatever reason that will discriminate. We want to help open doors for these people."

However, discrimination isn't the main reason disabled workers have trouble finding jobs in a recession, said Schnaith. They now have to compete with more people for the same jobs.

There also is a perceived added complication, said Dagny Faulk, director of research at the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State University. The legal requirement to make reasonable accommodations for disabled workers could be a disincentive in this economy, she said.

"An employer may be less able to afford (that) equipment during a recession, which would decrease the likelihood of hiring a person with disabilities," she said.

Those who advocate for the disabled say it is a myth that it costs an employer more to hire a disabled worker. The Job Accommodations Network estimates that more than half of the accommodations that must be made for disabled workers cost less than \$500.

Some even argue the payoff is greater, due to less turnover among disabled workers.

"A disabled person, once they get in a job, they are not going anywhere," said Ralph Braun, chief executive of BraunAbility, a Winamac-based manufacturer of wheelchair-accessible vans. Braun, who uses a wheelchair himself, makes it a point to hire skilled disabled workers. "Employers need to open their eyes and see there is reliability and stability and dependability."

Cannon IV has found disabled workers to be an asset to its Indianapolis-based printing and imaging company. Over the years, Cannon has received awards for its partnership with Noble of Indiana, a nonprofit serving more than 2,500 people with developmental disabilities, as well as with the Occupational Development Center in Illinois.

In its printer-cartridge recycling program, nearly 14,000 cartridges go to Noble and ODC each month, where employees remove packaging and sort them by model.

"The positive effects for the disadvantaged adults, such as encouraging their sense of self-esteem, accomplishment and independence, are immeasurable," Cannon says on its Web site.
