



### **The Disability Perspective: Why More People with Disabilities Aren't Working**

*The following op-ed by [Lauren Scrivo](#), communications specialist at Kessler Foundation, is published on [NJ.com](#):*

Diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy when I was six months old, I have never known the feeling of taking steps or breathing on my own. My disease also made my speech difficult to understand. Yet, when I was a child, I didn't realize that I had a disability. My family always said that I could do anything I set my mind to. So in a power wheelchair and on a ventilator, and a registered nurse by my side, I did just that.



Fortunately, I entered kindergarten in the September following the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—which stated that people with and without disabilities should have equal access to education. After my family spoke to the Board of Education, the large curbs blocking my wheelchair from entering the school were turned to ramps and I became the first child with a significant physical disability to enter the public school in Fairfield, NJ.

The fears of parents who were concerned about how I would interact with their children quickly faded. They realized that I was just like anyone else—I just did things a little differently—and I taught their children acceptance.

Going to college after completing high school wasn't a question; it was an expectation. Along my journey, I interned for a state senator and graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's in communications, earning top academic achievement in the writing department. I was ready to begin my career in communications. Thinking the job market would be just like the rest of my life had been—that businesses would see me for me and not my disability—I was about to enter uncharted territory.

While interviews are stressful enough, I quickly realized that they would be even that much more unpleasant for me. As I answered the polite questions, I was met with blank stares. I soon discovered that I could've said anything and it wouldn't have mattered; I wasn't going to get the job.

Two interviews stick out the most. One: I went to an employment agency that specializes in finding jobs for people with disabilities. Prepared with my portfolio of writing samples, I was handed a pamphlet stating that I could work as a janitor or mail clerk. I looked down at my arms that I can't lift against gravity and my four wheels and thought, "Do they really think I can sweep floors and deliver mail?!" To top it off, the director of the agency told me that my disability was too scary for others to be around so if I wanted to work that badly, I should find a job that allows me to work from home. I could have given up but I used it as motivation to prove them wrong.

Two: In the most honest interview I have had, the interviewer told me that while I was the most qualified for the position, she hesitated to hire me because she would have to learn how to interact with me. In that moment, I learned that the problem isn't me; it's that people are afraid of what they don't know.

Then I knew that if I was going to advance my life and career, I couldn't just be good enough; I had to be more qualified than most. I went back to school for my master's degree, volunteered in the public relations department of a local non-profit and started tutoring others in writing. Building my resume, I found an opportunity that changed my life.

I applied for an internship at Kessler Foundation, a non-profit in West Orange, N.J. that changes the lives of people with disabilities through rehabilitation research and the funding of disability employment initiatives. The fact that I had a disability didn't faze them. My skills mattered most. In fact, my disability worked to my advantage because I best understood the interests of their target audiences and medical language.

Upon completing my master's program, the Foundation created a full-time position for me. Now a communications specialist, I'm proud of my five years at the Foundation. I love coming to work every day and knowing that I'm making a difference in the lives of others like me who have disabilities. I'm valued in my organization and looked to for solutions by my colleagues. They no longer see me as having a disability—they see me as an equal. Importantly, I'm earning a paycheck and no longer need financial assistance. Now, I'm planning my future with my fiancé.

While I enjoy my success, I think of the 80 percent of Americans with disabilities who are not working. They faced so much rejection that many have stopped trying. How many times can you handle being told, "no?" How many blank stares and polite smiles can you take before giving up the search?

As we honor the 24th anniversary of the signing of the ADA, we celebrate the passage of guidelines that removed most of the physical barriers to equality and integration. The document gave us the tools but it's up to us to remove our attitudinal barriers. Attitudes and judgments prevent employers from hiring a job seeker with a disability.

As a nation, it's up to us to put meaning behind the written words. It's time to get over our fears and misconceptions and see people for who they are.

These individuals are sitting home, collecting financial assistance. If given the opportunity, they could be contributing their skills to the workforce and fueling the economy.

Ramps can only get a person to the door; but then the door has to open. I call on all of us to open those doors. Remove the barriers to employment that we cannot see.

I encourage people to get to know someone with a disability. Soon, they will see them for their abilities.

I'm hopeful that when my former classmates become hiring managers, they will remember me and not be afraid to hire a person with a disability.

Let's live up to the ideals set forth in the ADA. In the future, I'm looking forward to no longer needing "disability employment initiatives" as people with and without disabilities will be valued solely for their skills.

## From an Internship to a Life-Changing Career Path of Service

Terrina Williams has always known exactly what she wanted. As the Kean University student carefully filled out her internship application for the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars in Washington, DC, she reflected on her dream of making a career of serving others. There were so many things she wanted to accomplish in her life. But where would she begin if she didn't have the experience? Terrina has epilepsy and struggled to find employment. This internship was her chance to make her dream possible.



She sent the application, and crossed her fingers. Would she be accepted for this opportunity? Finally, the news came in. She was accepted! However, she didn't know how she was going to find the means to pay for it. Fortunately, she learned that she received a full scholarship to cover room and board and other related costs, made possible by Kessler Foundation.

Since 2010, Kessler Foundation has awarded more than \$100,000 in grants to the [Washington Center](#) to fund opportunities for New Jersey students with disabilities. Combining classroom learning with hands-on internships and training, these students receive academic credit and gain real work experience to build their resumes and make them more qualified candidates for future employment.

“Learning at the Washington Center is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a great foundation on which to begin the rest of my life,” Terrina explained. “I am eternally grateful for Kessler Foundation’s investment to help ensure that I have a successful and prosperous future.”

Terrina packed her bags and left her town in New Jersey to head to DC. For the first time, she was in an unfamiliar area, away from her family and friends, and had to learn how to get around independently. She quickly learned the DC metro system and commuted to work. As her first full-time work experience outside of college, she was determined to succeed.

For her internship, Terrina served as a research assistant at the Children’s Right’s Council in Landover, MD. Researching topics that would ultimately benefit separated or

divorced parents and their children, she immersed herself in her work. With her colleagues, she developed presentations used to educate and improve the lives of the population served. Importantly, she networked with a diverse group of leaders at various non-profits, and gained insight on how to become an active leader in the non-profit sector.

“Working at the Children’s Rights Council advanced my career in an extraordinary way,” she stated. “I worked with individuals that I never met but we interacted and worked very well together in the workplace. My supervisor was very impressed by my work and valued my contributions.”

Throughout her time in DC, Terrina’s perception about what is possible while having a disability changed into a more positive outlook. Everything came full circle when, for her civic engagement project, she interviewed an employee from the Epilepsy Foundation of America. Despite having epilepsy himself, just like Terrina, he completed college and held a full-time job. His success story inspired her to never give up, despite her health challenges.

As her internship concluded, Terrina returned home with a deeper appreciation and passion for nonprofit organizations. Upon graduating with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology, she continues to create positive change in her community. Working in her church, she organizes events to fill needs for her congregation and community. As a result of her experience at the Washington Center, she collaborates with other organizations—including the Slade Valentine Post #336 American Legion and the Food Bank of South Jersey—to positively impact those around her. With her partners, her church now provides free, healthy cooking classes to the community. All of her events were successful and attracted local press.

“My internship showed me how important it is to be a positive and helpful role model in everyone’s lives,” she said. “I have a stronger sense of self-confidence and self-worth. I strongly believe that I am well-equipped to face the world. With my strong faith and my new abilities, I know I am able to play an integral role in any work environment and be successful in my career.”

Terrina continues to serve her community as she initiates more outreach programs, such as career days. She aspires to become an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunities) counselor to ensure that people of all backgrounds and abilities do not face employment discrimination. In addition, she looks forward to forming her own non-profit organization—“Terrina’s Helping Hands”—to provide food, clothing, counseling, and helpful resources for those in need.

## Walking Down the Aisle

In May, Dez Duru was counting down the days to her December wedding. But without warning, the 30 year old had a sudden stroke. In an instant, her life as she knew it changed.

With the left side of her body severely weakened, Dez wondered what her future would be. Her first thought: "I need to get married and have my kids." But would that still be possible now? In a manual wheelchair, she questioned if she would still walk down the aisle.



As a patient at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, Dez was selected for a groundbreaking research study at Kessler Foundation, testing the effects of [Ekso GT](#)—a wearable, robotic, battery-powered exoskeleton that enables individuals with lower extremity weakness to stand and walk—with stroke survivors. While the Foundation has been investigating the effects of Ekso

in spinal cord injury, it is one of the only centers in the United States to test the device in the stroke population.

Dez was strapped in Ekso. Therapists counted down, “Three, two, one.” Dez leaned forward and the device stood her upright. She shifted her weight on her hips from left to right, activating sensors to trigger each step from Ekso—simulating a traditional, healthy walking pattern.

Research Scientist Karen Nolan, PhD, and Assistant Director of [Stroke Rehabilitation Research](#) Mooyeon Oh-Park, MD, are leading Kessler Foundation’s efforts in studying Ekso GT—the latest model by Ekso Bionics that allows for more adjustability and a more natural gait. As they watch each of the 12 participants use the device, the impact becomes even more evident.

After an injury or stroke, patients have an increasingly shorter time in rehabilitation. There is so much for these individuals and their families to learn, such as how to transfer from a wheelchair to a bed. How do therapists maximize the time they have to work on regaining lost function?

As [Dr. Nolan](#) explained, “Robotics therapy is revolutionizing rehabilitation. Instead of individuals taking two dozen strenuous steps in an hour-long therapy session, they can take more than 300 steps. We’re assessing how the increased repetition of natural steps impacts recovery.” She emphasizes the importance of the individual recovering from stroke getting up and walking as quickly as possible. “It gives them the feeling of that left, right, left, right, walking pattern to help their brain connect to the motion and hopefully we can get that change to stick,” she said.

For Dez, walking in Ekso means regaining what she thought she lost forever. “I feel a little relieved,” she stated. “I’m free...my independence is coming back.” For the bride-to-be, that’s all she can ask for.

Dez is one of 12 stroke survivors to test Ekso GT. She hopes that her participation will help more individuals recover mobility after stroke. Other individuals, just like Dez, are waiting to take their first steps.

Dez continues to get stronger every day. She looks forward to walking down the aisle, without assistance, and dancing with the love of her life at their wedding.

Watch Dez’s interview with [CBS 2’s Alexis Christoforous](#).



## People With Disabilities Still Find Job Market a Challenge

The following op-ed by [Rodger DeRose](#), president and chief executive officer of Kessler Foundation, is published in [The Hill](#):



People with disabilities are being left out of the economic recovery – a disconcerting development that suggests that more work needs to be done to help create employment opportunities for this population.

After all, PWD can hold public office, earn advanced degrees, crack the starting lineup for a Super Bowl winning team and compete on *Dancing with the Stars*.

So, why aren't more PWD working in everyday jobs?

What can be done to correct this?

New strategies need to be developed in order to expand [employment opportunities for PWD](#).

Indeed, hiring PWD enhances the diversity of a workforce. PWD can, and want to, contribute to the economy.

Still, to understand how urgently a solution is needed, we must first look the current situation.

The July 2014 Bureau of Labor Statistics Jobs Report paints a discouraging, frustrating picture.

Three key indicators – employment-to-population ratio, labor force participation rate and percentage of people looking for work – were all down for PWD compared to the same month in 2013.

In fact, this has been the case for every single month so far in 2014. The year started off with low numbers – disappointing statistics that have become the rule, not the exception.

The most recent BLS Report said 288,000 jobs were created throughout the economy. But not enough of those new jobs went to PWD.

This is something that can – and should – be corrected.



The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) turns 24 in July. More opportunities should exist for PWD by now, nearly a quarter century after the act was signed.

We are not as far along as we need to be, however. While many companies — to be ADA compliant — have implemented disability policies, far fewer companies have actual programs in place to hire PWD.

Consider this: In 2013, just over one in six — or 17.6 percent — of PWD actually had a job, according to a Labor Department report issued in June.

In addition, the employment number doesn't even reflect how many PWD have given up on their search to find employment. Even one person is too many.

Each year, the number of PWD grows. So, how do we get more PWDs to work – some of whom have never held a job?

No one solution in itself provides that answer.

The traditional one person at a time approach isn't opening up as many doors as need to be opened. We need to apply strategies that will provide jobs to large numbers of people with disabilities.

The Obama Administration is doing what it can, issuing a mandate stipulating that that federal contractors must employ a minimum of 7 percent of workers with disabilities or prove they are taking steps to hire more in order to avoid facing penalties or losing their government contracts.

Still, while this development is a step in the right direction, it is not the only solution being suggested.

Schools, corporations, nonprofit organizations and state and federal agencies are providing resources and developing best practices to create or expand job opportunities, build connections with employers and prepare PWD for employment

Large companies are slowly engaging. Some are actively participating in hiring – others are looking into the best way to integrate more PWD into their workforce.

Public-private partnerships are helping to integrate more PWDs into the workforce at national companies such as Walgreens, Lowe's, OfficeMax and Pepsi Americas Beverages.

Creativity also plays a part. One non-profit, the Center for Head Injury Services in St. Louis thought out of the box and created their own small business that provides a service to the community and earns money for the charity while providing jobs for PWD.

Everybody wins, right?

The business that Center for Head Injury Services started is Destination Desserts, a purpose-driven social enterprise business that employs people with disabilities to bake and sell cookies, brownies, cupcakes and other delicious items.

They use a food truck to extend their brand awareness and sell products at corporate parks and community events. Most importantly, Destination Desserts is providing opportunities for training and employment for people with brain injuries. Funding social enterprise businesses is an effective strategy that benefits the community while expanding job opportunities.

The employment situation for PWD will only improve when government, nonprofits, and corporations work together to implement strategies that integrate people with disabilities into diverse, accessible workplaces.

Real progress can only be made when PWD are held to the same standards as their fellow employees and valued for their contributions to the workforce. PWD should be hired because employers *WANT* to hire them, not because they *NEED* to.

*Rodger DeRose is President and CEO of Kessler Foundation, a national organization dedicated to improving employment and job training options for Americans with disabilities. In addition, Kessler Foundation is a global leader in rehabilitation research that improves cognition and mobility for people with multiple sclerosis, brain injury, stroke, spinal cord injury and other disabling conditions.*

**Help us continue to change the lives of people with disabilities!**

