FEDERAL AND STATE PROGRAMS FOR PWD EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although there have been great strides in modern legislation surrounding the improvement of the lives of people with disabilities (PWD) in the United States, there are numerous gaps that exist in current programs. The primary hindrances standing in the way of accessible federal and state programs for PWD are the programs' bureaucratic barriers and lack of transparency. In order to determine whether this is true, and to what extent this impacts the effectiveness of government-run disability programs, this study analyzed how these problems manifest through (1) budgetary allocations toward disability programs, (2) the opinions of program participants, and (3) the insights of experts and researchers in the field. Part of this analysis included a focus on the states of California and Texas—two states with similar demographics and disabled populations, but varying political atmospheres.

To begin this research, we compiled a list of current key federal disability programs to substantiate our secondary research, which examined government monetary allocation towards disability. We analyzed these trends over time, and whether or not there have been any changes in these budgets by gathering this data from the past 20 years, as well as compiling rates of unemployment and enrollment in higher education for PWD. For primary data, we conducted two forms of research: an online survey and interviews. The purpose of the survey was to gain direct feedback from individuals who have experience with disability programs to understand their levels of satisfaction and assess any barriers in service accessibility. For interviews, we spoke to researchers, government officials, disability advocates, and regional center representatives who have experience involving disability programs.

In our secondary research, we found that funding for disability programs has stagnated over time and, for the most part, decreased as a percentage of overall federal and state budgets. This remained true for many individual programs. For Medicare and Medicaid, funding for both programs have increased over the past 20 years, but at a lesser rate than the overall Department of Health and Human Services budget. ***At the state-level, California spends about $19,949 for healthcare per person with disability, while Texas spends about $17,189, despite the fact that Texas has a smaller population of PWD.***[1] These differences in spending can, in part, be explained by the differences in political attitudes by the two states. As for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income, the Social Security Administration's two main disability programs, funding has also stagnated. ***Funding for the administration in total has increased by about 300%, while the funding for the individual programs have not reflected these same growth rates.***[2] This stagnated funding contrasts with the 400% increase in beneficiaries for both of these programs, making it obvious that disabled Social Security beneficiaries are not receiving as many benefits in 2020 as they were in 2000.[3] Similar stagnations are present in California, where a lack of benefits and an increasing cost of living make living under the poverty line a reality for many disabled residents.

1 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Data – BRFSS, 2019
2 USA Spending. "Government Spending Explorer | USAspending," May 31, 2021. https://usaspending.gov/explorer.
3 Social Security Administration. "SSI Recipients by State and County, 2000 - Table 2." Social Security Administration Research, Statistics, and Policy Analysis, 2000. https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi_sc/2000/table02.html.
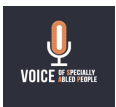
Federal funding for higher education was difficult for us to locate. However, there are drastic disparities in enrollment rates of PWD, trending up to three times lower than for nondisabled people. Additionally, there is a difference of about 17.8% between people without disabilities with a Bachelor's degree or higher and people with disabilities with a Bachelor's degree or higher.4 Therefore, we can assume that current programs are insufficient in making universities more accessible. For special education, funding increased significantly between 2000 and 2005 but has remained relatively unchanged since then. These trends continue at the state-levels. In California, the disabled student population has increased, yet special education funding has decreased since 2008. Meanwhile, Texas's special education funding has increased by 27% since 2015, on the heels of a federal investigation finding that Texas arbitrarily capped the number of students allowed to receive special education services at 8.5%.[5] In the employment sector, workers' compensation programs like the Black Lung Program have drastically decreased in funding since 2000, especially after the 2008 recession and declines in employment in high injury risk workplaces. Other programs, like the Ticket to Work and Pathways programs that help PWD find employment, do not have budgetary data widely available. However, when observing the large disparities in employment between people with and without disabilities, it can lead us to assume that employment programs for PWD in the workforce are not receiving sufficient funding. Similar trends persisted in California and Texas. Disabled veterans' programs act as a form of workers' compensation, but the trends do not mirror those of broad workers' compensation funding. Funding for disabled veterans' benefits have greatly increased over the past 20 years, by about $80 million.[6] Similar increases in funding occurred in Texas, but spending in California declined, despite the large veteran population in the state. The results of our survey showed us that, overall, opinions on these programs are highly varied. When asked to rank their satisfaction, respondents' answers ranged from moderately unsatisfied to moderately satisfied. Additionally, the majority of respondents still rely on family support, despite receiving services (programs do not provide enough support for independent living); it is also moderately complicated to access services and accommodations from programs, and a lack of information about programs can be a major barrier to accessing them. Based on our research, we have four recommendations for policymakers to improve program effectiveness and access. The first is to work with the National Council on Disability and other disability organizations to establish a central hub of information for potential beneficiaries to access and understand programs easily. Second, programs must ensure that professionals working closely with PWD are educated on disability issues in order to prevent ableism and pathologization. The third is for the government to increase transparency in monetary allocation and spending on these programs and make this information more easily accessible in order for the community to determine budgetary sufficiency.

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4 Texas Workforce Investment Council. "People with Disabilities: A Texas Profile," June 2016. https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/twic/Disabilities_Profile.pdf.

5 Naaz Modan. "Texas Poured Nearly $1B into New Special Ed Funding Following IDEA Violations." K-12 Dive, January 31, 2020. https://www.k12-dive.com/news/texas-poured-nearly-1b-into-new-special-ed-funding-following-idea-violatio/571420/.

6 US Department of Veterans Affairs. "Veterans Benefits Administration Reports." https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/.
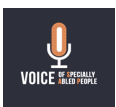
The final recommendation is the most simple: include PWD in the decision-making process when changing or implementing programs. Future researchers who plan to do more work in this field should create a comprehensive compilation of budgetary data, as the amount of unstandardized data we found made it difficult for us to draw many definitive conclusions. Additionally, they should look further into the role that intersectionality and multiple marginalized identities play in impacting PWD's access to federal and state programs. This is important in making sure that programs are effective for everyone, no matter their identity. Although we cannot say for sure that the data supports our hypothesis due to our small sample size, there is a strong indication that it holds some substantiated truths. The budgetary and primary data we have shows that there are problems with these government programs due to the degrees of either complete dissatisfaction or complete neutrality among survey respondents—if the programs were very effective, the majority of respondents would likely have been very satisfied with them. Also, the stagnated budgets for disability programs show that there is a lack of interest in disability issues at the state and federal levels. This disinterest is further proven by the fact that overall state and federal budgets have increased substantially over the past 20 years, and while disability budgets have also slightly increased to parallel that, they have actually decreased as a percentage of the overall budgets. This indicates overall monetary increases from the government are funding other public sectors, not disability. These points reveal that any obstacles facing the entire nation will have an even greater effect on people with disabilities, making it more difficult for them to get the assistance and support they need. Therefore, federal and state governments must put more effort into ensuring their disability programs are as effective as possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fatima Jaber was the project manager for this project and Sunghee Choi, Shambhavi (Sanju) Dubey, Natasha Auer, Josephine Ward were researchers.

Fatima Jaber is a student of University of California who wants to understand the disability policy and is eager to contribute to a push towards policy change.

Natasha Auer is a student at the University of California and is motivated to learn about disability programs and lack of awareness of such programs among people.

Sunghee Choi is a master's student at University of California, Santa Barbara and a single mom to autistic son and is interested in a fair and ethical autism assessment.

Shambhavi Dubey is a student of University of Texas and is interested in reformed laws pertaining to disabled people.

Josephine Ward is a student of Northwestern University and wants to understand policy research and develop deeper empathy and ability to interact with PwDs.

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WHY THIS MATTERS TO VOSAP

VOSAP has been advocating for D&I as it relates to Persons with Disabilities, promoting their employment. The organization has worked with the Govt of India for putting in financial incentives for Employers who train and hire SAPs. This research project aimed to analyze data and identify the failings of the ADA in bridging the employment gap in the US since inception of ADA 1990. VOSAP has a Corporate Connect program with proprietary DII framework, designed to work with corporate leaders and HR in companies interested in hiring SAPs as part of an Inclusive and diverse workforce that strengthens their bottom line and creates an Inclusive work environment.

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Voice of Specially Abled People (VOSAP) is a global advocacy organization built on the principles of Empowerment of Specially Abled People. In Special Consultative Status with UN ECOSOC, VOSAP is working to create an Inclusive and Accessible world by accelerating implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and goals of UN CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) treaty. In addition to enabling individuals with assistive devices, surgical interventions, scholarships etc, VOSAP has created innovative digital transformation tools to promote inclusion of Person with disabilities such as (a) Virtual Art Gallery on Disability to educate masses on disability and promote inclusion, (b) create crowdsource demand for accessibility of public places and create mass movement of virtually connected ≈ 10,000+ volunteers/change-makers using VOSAP App.