

# A Focus on Workplace Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities

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# Learning Objectives

- Recognize some of the most salient challenges in the workplace for individuals with disabling conditions
- Identify some effective workplace accommodations reported by employees with vision and mobility limitations
- Describe strategies for how users have become aware and have acquired needed workplace accommodations

# Workplace Accommodations

- While there are many case studies in the literature describing workplace accommodations for specific individuals, there are few large-scale studies about workplace accommodations (Butterfield & Ramseur, 2005)
- In addition, there is little information about whether the types of accommodations used differ with age.

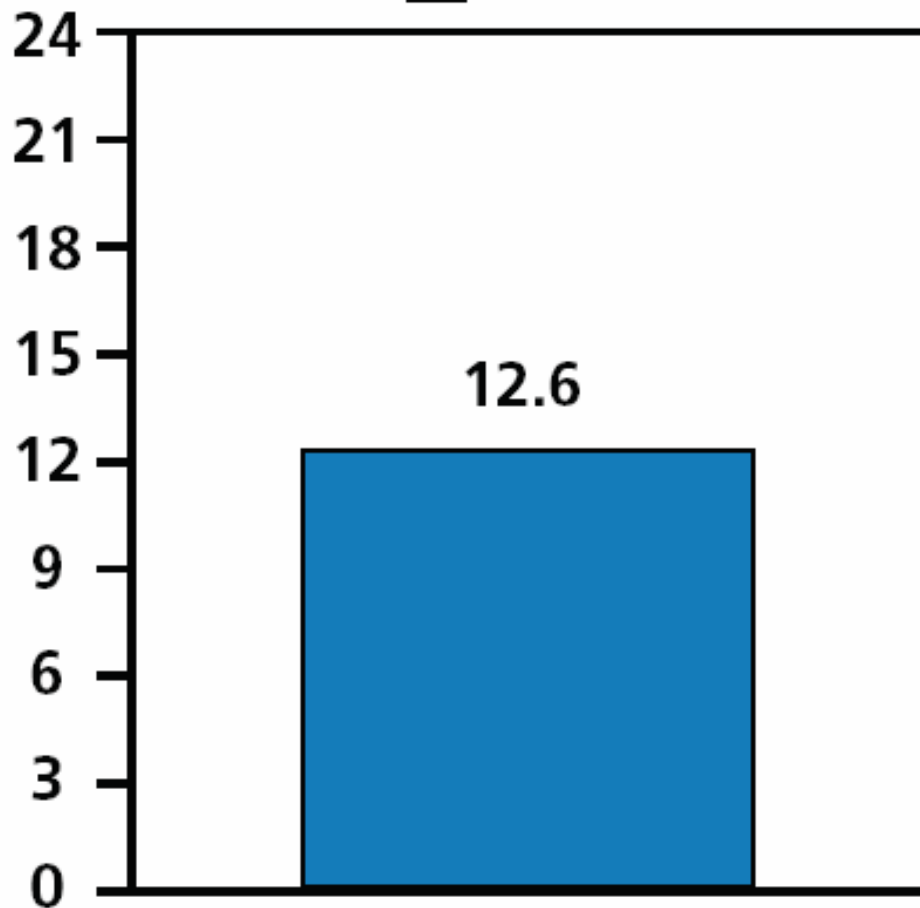
# Workplace Accommodations

- Job Accommodation Network (JAN) data show that most employers report financial benefits from providing accommodations for employees who have a disabling condition due to a reduction in the cost of training new employees and an increase in worker productivity.

(Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor)

# Prevalence Rate (%)

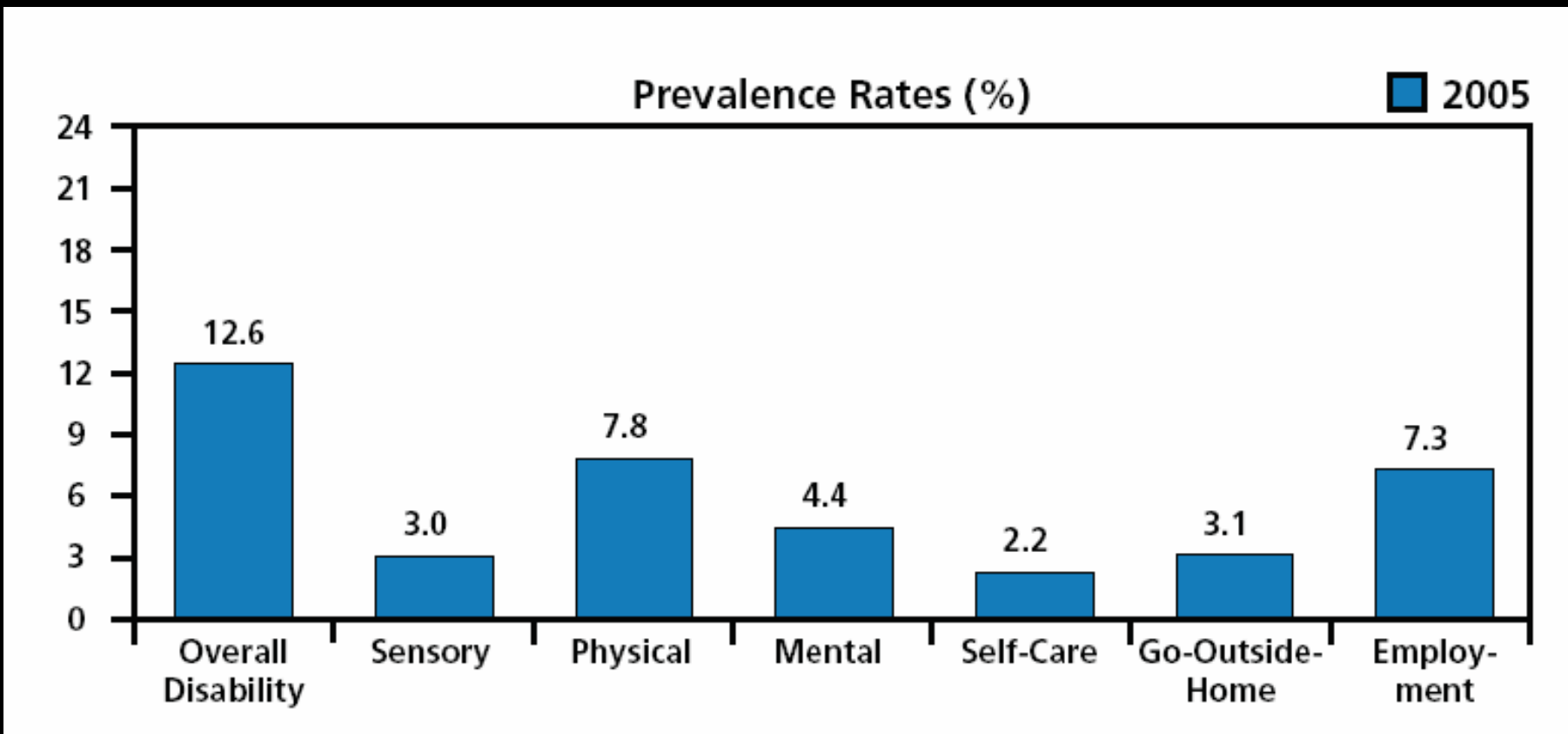
■ 2005



**PREVELENCE OF DISABILITY AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)**

Rehabilitation Research Training Center on Disability Demographics & Statistics (2005)

2005 Disability Status Reports. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

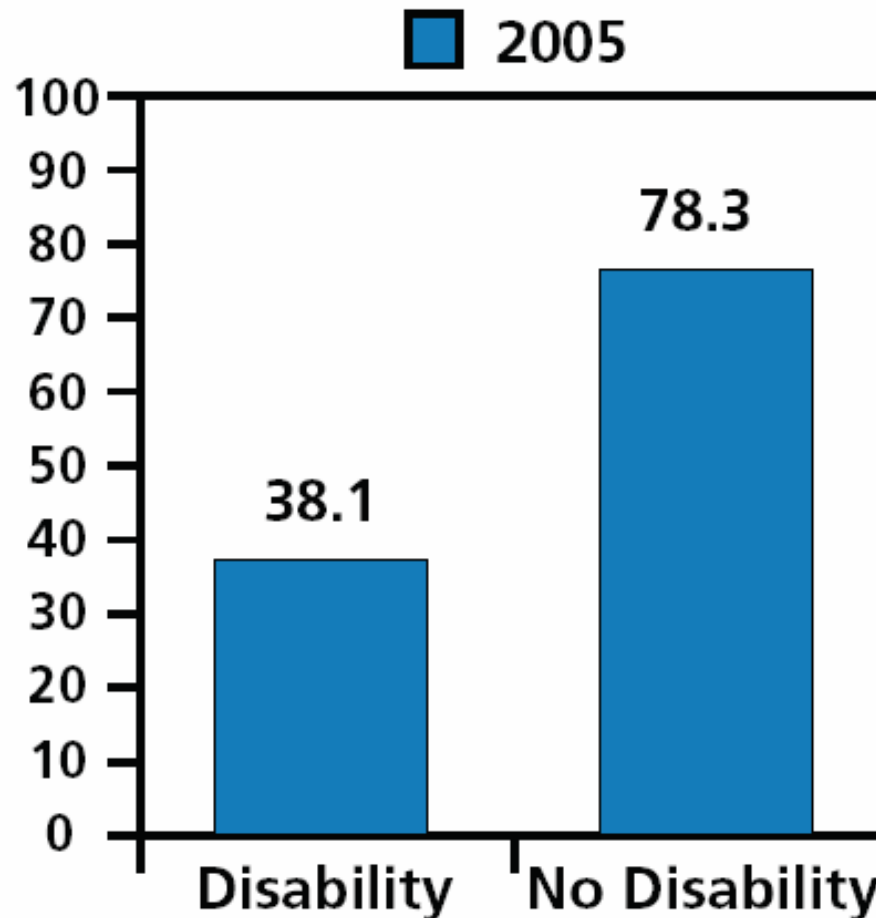


## PREVELENCE OF DISABILITY AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)

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## Employment Rates (%)

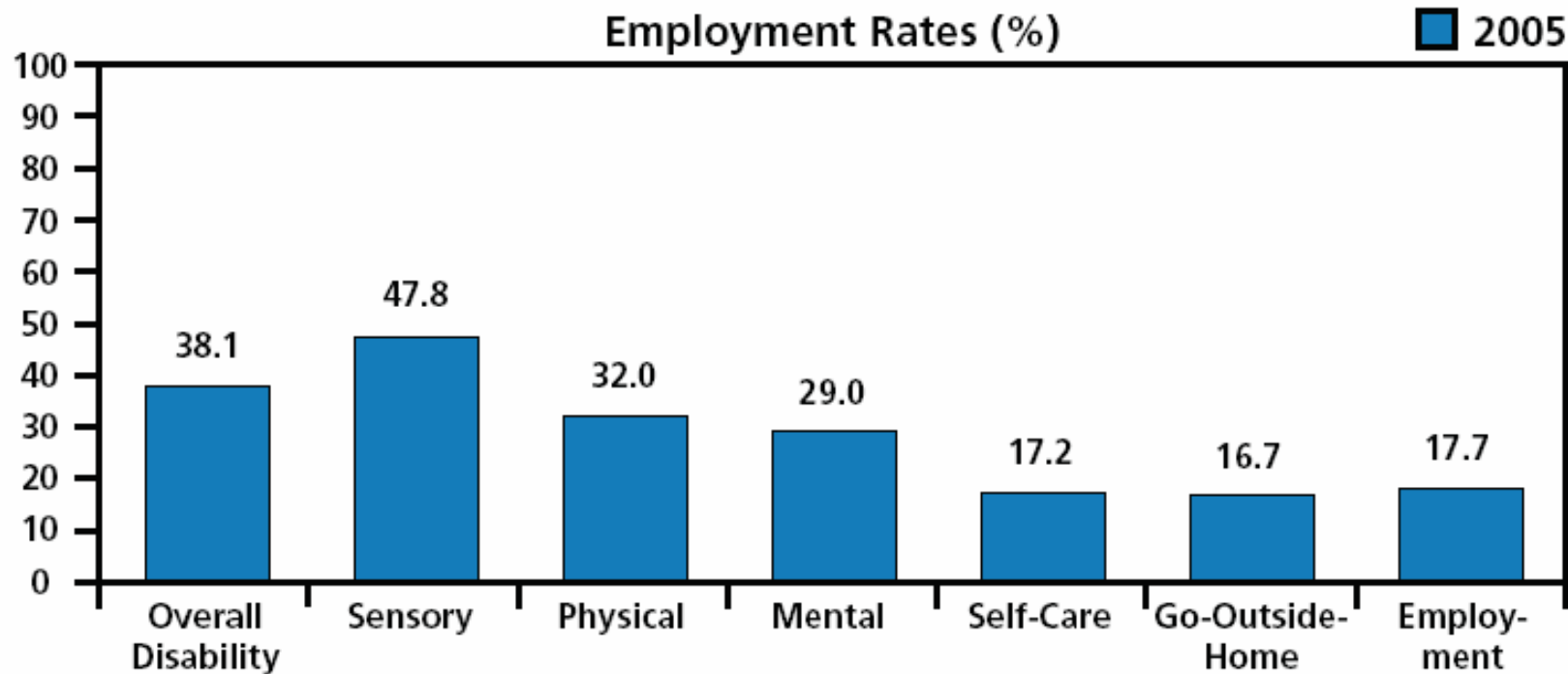


**EMPLOYMENT RATES AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)**

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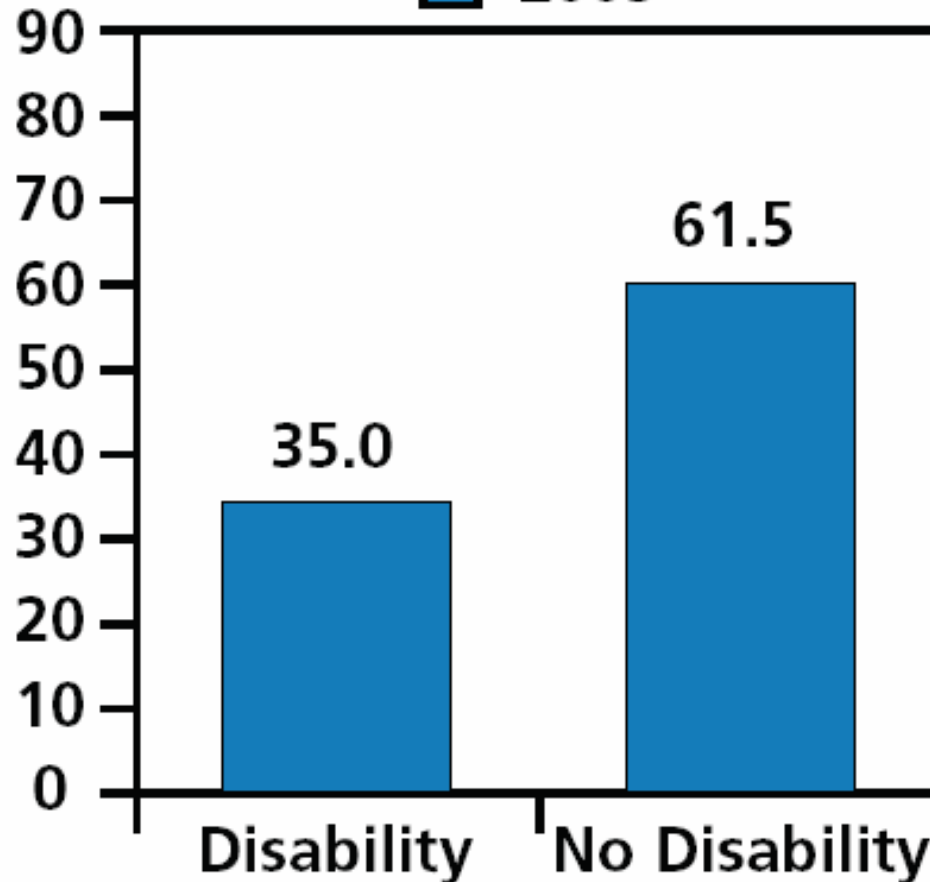


## EMPLOYMENT RATES AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)

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# Median Household Income (\$, thousands)

■ 2005



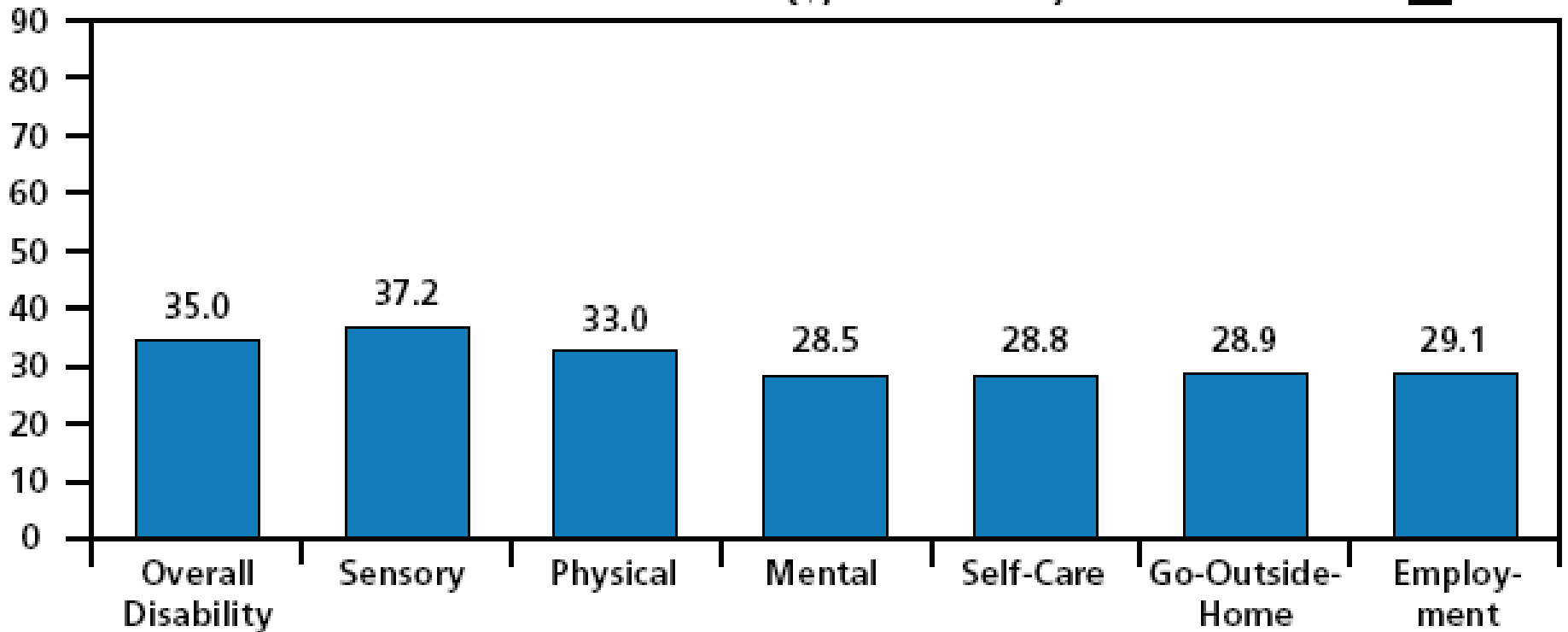
**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)**

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Median Household Income (\$, thousands)

2005



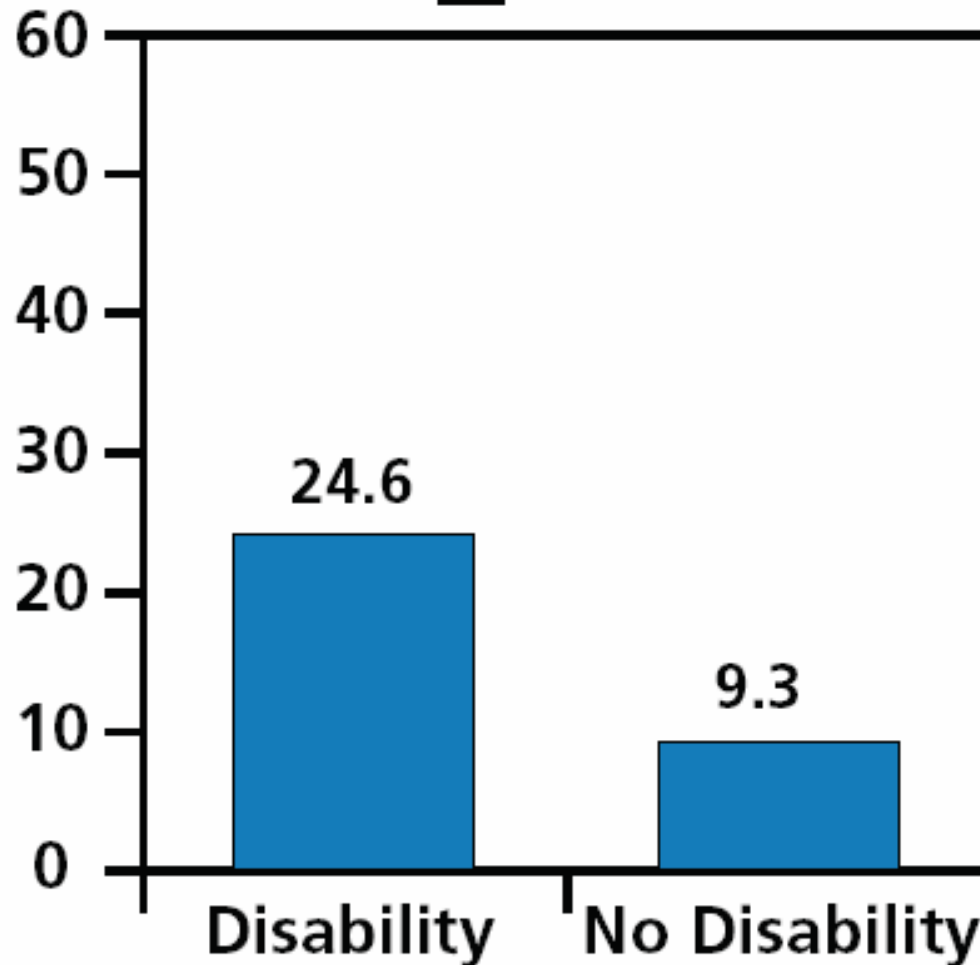
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## Poverty Rates (%)

■ 2005



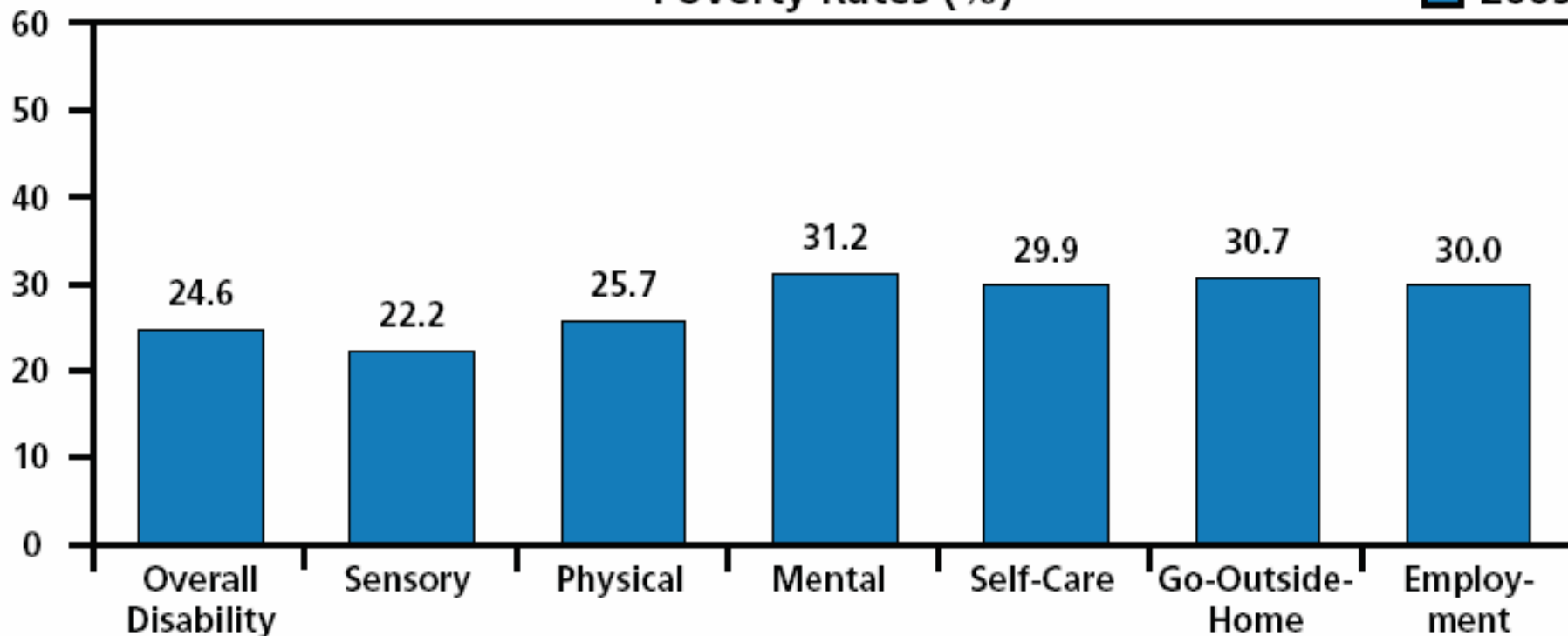
**POVERTY RATES AMONG WORKING-AGE ADULTS (18-64)**

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## Poverty Rates (%)

2005



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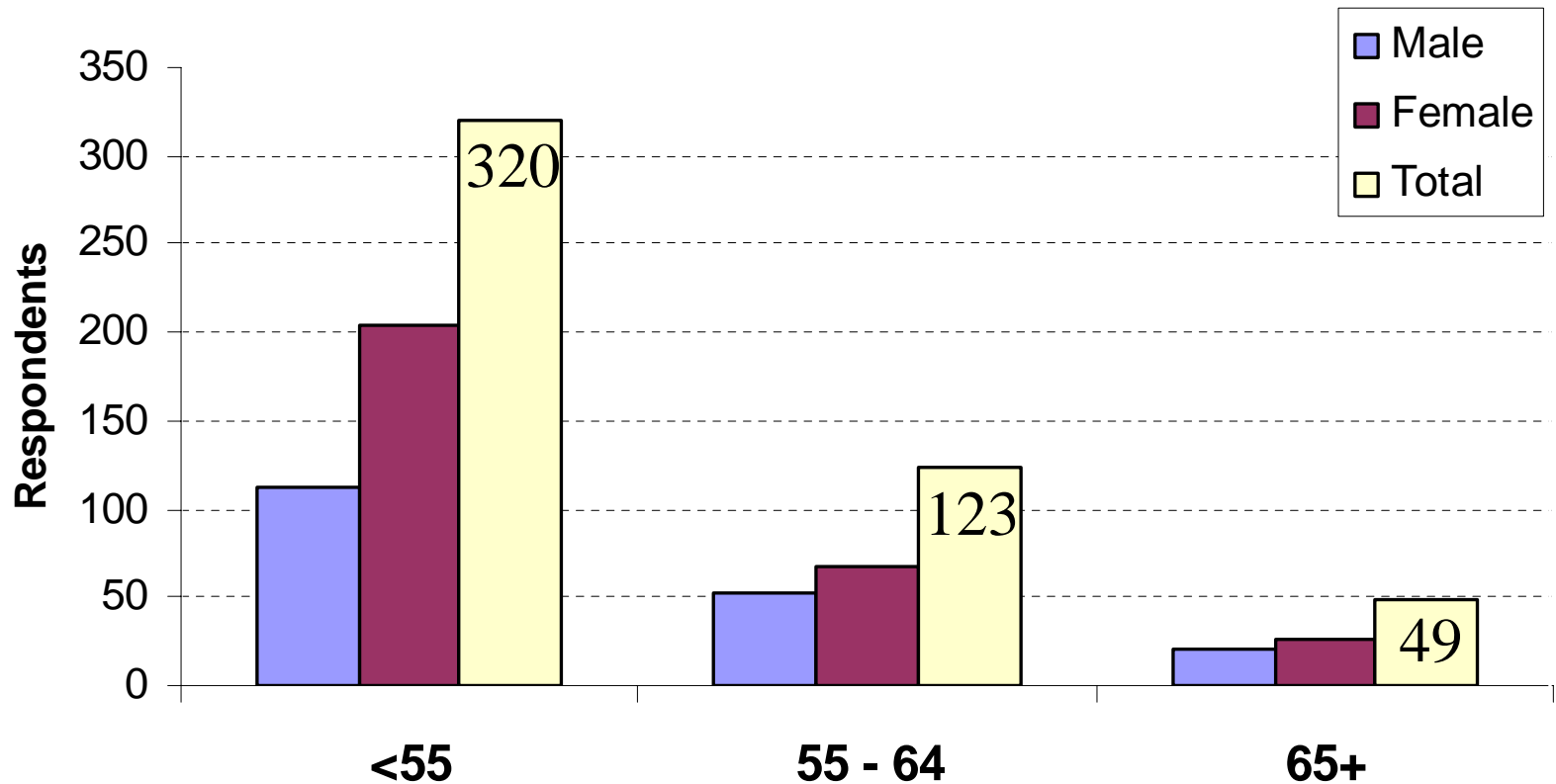
# Work RERC: Survey of User Needs

- Survey of people with disabilities, focus was to assess current & previous employment experiences
- Determine what accommodations are used & by whom, with particular interest in AT, UD, & outcomes of older workers
- Identify gaps in provision of workplace accommodations

# Survey of Workplace User Needs

- 510 survey respondents
- Survey data collected primarily via internet, also by telephone interviews, and mail
- Attempt to recruit participants from a wide array of disability groups and sources
- National study enrollment effort

# Age and Gender





# Education and Income Status

	N	% of Sample
<b>Education</b>		
No HS		6.1
HS Diploma	57	11.8
Some College	105	21.7
4yr College	99	20.5
Graduate Work	162	33.4
Prof./Post Grad	30	6.2
<b>Income</b>		
<12000	78	18.9
12000 – 19999	88	21.3
20000 – 29999	79	19.1
30000 – 49999	74	17.9
50000+	95	22.9

**N = 484**

**N = 414**

# Employment Status

- 22% of sample (N = 115) reported being currently unemployed, with older respondents most likely to report this.  $F(2,113) = 5.07, p < .01$
- Among unemployed, 41% were actively seeking employment, with older respondents least likely to report this. **NS**
- Most commonly reported occupations included:
  - Professional / Technical (64%)
  - Administrative / Support (44%)
  - Marketing / Sales (32%)

# Reported Limitations by Age

	Age	18-54	55-64	65+
<b>Motor Limitations</b>		%	%	%
Changing Position		39	47	33
Moving Around		39	37	29
Manipulating Objects		28	28	16
Coordinating Movements		26	20	6
<b>Mental Limitations</b>		%	%	%
Perceiving Space		*20	15	8
Attending to Task		22	19	18
Remembering		19	14	12
Processing Information		9	10	6
<b>Sensory Limitations</b>		%	%	%
Visual Impairment		35	46	**57
Hearing Impairment		7	11	14
Detecting Odors or Flavors		14	13	12
Sensing in Touch and Texture		10	9	12

\* significant from other age groups,  $p < .05$

\*\* significant from other age groups,  $p < .01$

# Difficulty Performing Visual Tasks

	<i>n</i>	<i>% w/in group</i>
18 - 54	92	28%
55 - 64	39	32%
65+	9	18%
all ages	141	29%

Types of  
Difficulties:

- Reading a computer monitor
- Reading paper documents
- Perceiving colored lights or controls
- Difficulty with contrast
- Sensing visual stimuli
- Seeing objects from far away
- Seeing because of improper lighting

# Vision Accommodations by Age

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Accessible Documents (OCR)</i>	<i>Reading Guides / Aids</i>	<i>Braille Display</i>	<i>None Provided</i>
<b>18 - 54</b>	10%	14%	7%	12%
<b>55 - 64</b>	7%	7%	4%	17%
<b>65+</b>	0%	0%	0%	50%

**Typical Accommodations:** Reading aids, electronic media, scanner, magnifier, enlarged print, Braille, CCTV, anti-glare devices, new display, more light, assistant provided, redesign job

# Difficulty Manipulating/Moving Objects

	<i>n</i>	<i>% w/in group</i>
18 - 54	85	27%
55 - 64	27	22%
65+	7	14%
all ages	121	25%

**Types of Difficulties:** Using workstation features (desk, file cabinet, shelves)  
Lifting materials, tools or equipment  
Carrying materials/equipment  
Transferring materials  
Using hand-held tools and work-related devices  
Accessing files and documents  
Handling materials, tools or equipment  
Using heavy machinery

# Manipulation/Moving Accommodations by Age

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Buddy System</i>	<i>Assistant</i>	<i>Equipment Modifications</i>	<i>Gripping Aids</i>	<i>Carts</i>
<b>18 - 54</b>	14%	12%	11%	11%	6%
<b>55 - 64</b>	21%	11%	5%	4%	14%
<b>65+</b>	7%	14%	7%	7%	21%

**Typical Accommodations:** equipment modifications, gripping aids, cart, custom devices, clamping devices, leverage aids, lifts, hoists, measuring tools, buddy system, assistant, job redesign

# Difficulty Moving Around

	<i>n</i>	<i>% w/in group</i>
18 - 54	108	34%
55 - 64	43	35%
65+	15	31%
all ages	167	34%

**Types of  
Difficulties:**

- Getting to work (e.g. transportation)
- Moving along halls & around equipment
- Climbing stairs, ramps, and other inclines
- Opening/moving through doorways



# Mobility Accommodations by Age

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Accessible Transportation</i>	<i>Accessible Parking</i>	<i>Modification to Restroom</i>	<i>Flexible Schedule</i>	<i>Ramps</i>
<b>18 - 54</b>	15%	10%	11%	8%	9%
<b>55 - 64</b>	13%	10%	9%	13%	6%
<b>65+</b>	11%	14%	7%	2%	11%

## Typical Accommodations:

**General Workspace:** accessible parking, restroom modifications, elevator, ramps, automatic door, emergency call button, handrails, stairlift

**Personal Accommodations:** mobility aid, accessible transportation, flexible schedule, telecommuting

# Conclusions: Changing Face of Disability in the Workplace

- Mobility accommodations are by far the largest type of accommodations (avg. 4 accommodations per individual with difficulty)
- Accommodations often vary by age
  - Older adults less likely to get big ticket items such as modified workstations and accessible transportation (except hearing aids)
  - Older adults with VI are least likely to receive accommodations
  - Receiving **no accommodations** consistently increases with age (except accommodations for hearing loss)
  - Less job flexibility as age increases (e.g., less likely to get flexible schedule, buddy system)

# Focus Group Interviews: Methods

- Three in-person focus groups were conducted
  - A vision impairment group & a mobility-limited group will be discussed today
  - IRB-approved study, consenting procedures and a detailed explanation of the intent of the focus group activity were provided to all participants prior to focus group activity
  - Questions were asked that related to workplace barriers & accommodations, as well as strategies in navigating acquisition of assistive technology
  - One facilitator ran the groups, and two assistants were present to take field notes and deal with any specific technical-related issues
  - All discussions were digitally recorded and then transcribed
  - \$50 incentive payment for participation was provided
  - Data was qualitatively analyzed for thematic content

# Vision Impairment Group N = 8

- Range of vision impairment from totally blind (NLP) to individuals with low vision
- All but one focus group members were currently employed
- AT use reported by participants included both high-tech as well as low-tech items

# Tools, Equipment, and Technology Used in the Workplace

- All members reported using computers, with several reporting the use of screen reader software (JAWS), two used magnification software (ZOOM Text), and two used a Pac Mate
- The use of scanners and CCTVs was common among most respondents
- Digital recorders for note taking were also used by several members.
- One employee received additional computer training to enable access to company proprietary software to work with JAWS
- Lower tech strategies included Braille, high intensity lighting, hand-held magnification, and stickers and tactile markings to locate files, folders, keys, etc

# Experiences with Current or Former Employers re: Accommodation

- Most members felt that employers were by and large supportive with respect to helping accommodate their employees
- Two individuals had encountered difficulties with employers who were not receptive to providing accommodations

“I think sometimes employers do not want to [help]...in relation to other jobs I have had, employers see some of the equipment we need as too expensive in order for us to do our jobs, and they don't want to pay for it.”

“Like just the different programs, maybe JAWS, and different software we use, sometimes they don't want to you know they can have a sighted person come in and do the work, and we have special needs, and not just us with visual problems, but any kind of disability.”

# Experiences with Current or Former Employers re: Accommodation

- Other members reported a lack of formalized training or assistance for visually impaired employees.

“I worked at [*a national Bank*] and they hired ten visually impaired people for the call center, and they did not know how to incorporate all of us into their traditional training. We had to develop an informal training and took care of ourselves.”

“I know when I worked at [*a national retailer*] a few years ago I was the first visually impaired person to work there and they didn't know what to do. They kept giving me papers to read. I am like, c'mon, I can't see it... I told them if they have something to give me in writing can you please enlarge it so I can see it. My VR counselor paid for my computer and software, so the only problem was really only the reading handouts.”

# How to Discuss Accommodation & Equipment Needs with Employer?

- All members agreed that an employee who has a need for accommodation **must be direct and candid** when dealing with their supervisor / employer re: this issue
- Four members stressed that the responsibility of identifying both limitations and accommodations as being their own
- The majority of this focus group described difficulties in seeking accommodations such as red tape, and intolerance from employers, VR, and others



# How to Discuss Accommodation & Equipment Needs with Employer?

“I talk to them [*employers*] and tell them what I need, even though there may be a backlash.”

“You have two choices: you can either go for whatever it is you want to do and figure out how to get there, or become a victim of the system.”

“I didn’t ask or even know how too. I just struggled through the job, used reading glasses and a magnifier. I did not know what was available. I went through college on my own, elementary school, and I would never do it again that way.”

“It is all self reliance, and it is the way you make the request with the employer.”

# How to Discuss Accommodation & Equipment Needs with Employer?

“Self advocacy is critical, because, whether it is pre or post ADA, how do you expect your employer to help you or accommodate your needs **if you don't know your needs?**”

“It is an individuals' responsibility to find out what resources are out there ... advocate and show your work to your employer.”

“You must recognize that you don't know everything about assistive technology. You have to develop a network of resources. Whether it be those professionals in the business or people that live it.”

# Awareness of New Technologies and Workplace Accommodations

- Members reported relying on personal networks, support groups, newsletters, list-serves, internet sites and their own understanding to help find appropriate accommodations when needed.

“You must understand the requirements of the job and then you can understand what accommodations you need.”

“Talking to your friends, they can tell you what is out there. Also, just keeping up with new technology.”

# Mobility Impairment Group N = 8

- All focus group members were wheelchair users, 5 power, 3 manual
- Every member was employed or actively attending college or training
- Six members had experienced traumatic injuries that resulted in loss of mobility

# Tools, Equipment, and Technology Used in the Workplace

- Three primary accommodation themes were pointed to by this group, including:
- Workspace & environmental modifications, such as desk / computer setup
- Access into building / workplace
- Parking features enhanced, or reserved parking created

# Experiences with Current or Former Employers re: Accommodation

- Comments on workspace modifications:

“My office is set where I can reach the fax or copy machine, the printer is on the floor, and we moved around file cabinets.”

“When we came to setting up the copier, because half the staff is in wheel chairs, we rental copy company remove the mounting platform and dropped the copier down four inches- so everyone in a chair could see and could use it.”

“They changed all the door knobs to the lever kind.”

# Experiences with Current or Former Employers re: Accommodation

## ➤ Comments on Entrance into Workplace:

“The doors are into the office and they are real heavy and we have a swipe card you have to use...they looked into getting an automatic door and it cost over \$15,000, so they don't want to do it, so I scrape up against the door all the time.”

“I can't use the parking deck because there is no elevator because that is where you use the swipe card to get in so I park in front but it is not covered so if it rains I park far away and go around the building not to get wet.”

# How to Discuss Accommodation & Equipment Needs with Employer?

- As with the VI group, many in the mobility-limited group insist that the individual with a disability must be a strong advocate for themselves

“Be vocal; you just have to ask, and follow through.”

“You have to be the advocate in terms of dealing with employer, because most are slow to react...you have to prod them and stay on them to get what you want.”

“I have always got anything I asked for, but you have to ask. If you don't ask you will never know, and there is a polite way to do it.”



# How to Discuss Accommodation & Equipment Needs with Employer?

“I am not a shy person to begin with, which I guess works in my favor. I followed through and made sure I made my needs clear and watched how people reacted.”

“When I went back to work I was so grateful that I had a job I did not want to make any waves. They were willing to help, but I kind of held them back.”

# Awareness of New Technologies and Workplace Accommodations

- As with the VI group, mobility focus group members reported relying on personal networks, support groups, newsletters, list-serves, internet sites and their own understanding to help find appropriate accommodations when needed
- Once again, self-reliance was stressed by participants

# Strategies on Mentoring Newly Injured Persons

“I have had that opportunity several times when I come here to the Center. And I say it is bad right now but it gets better. Once you get outside it is the real world and gain that sense of accomplishment because it is the real world, people are not there to help you like they are here. And if you are having a bad day, sometimes it helps.”

# Strategies on Mentoring Newly Injured Persons

“Let them know life goes on after the injury. Sometimes they don’t want to hear it, but you have to be patient. You tell them things get better in most cases, be encouraging.”

“You have to be compassionate but understand where they are on that day. But it is amazing once you get away from this environment how much better it gets.”

“Offer hope.”

# Strategies on Mentoring Newly Injured Persons

“I say I have been in the chair, now 33 years, and you got a lot of people walking around here saying things get better. I have been there, done that, I live by myself, drive myself, finished college, traveled the world...”

“I was injured in a motorcycle accident, so I work with those people and sky divers, high risk people. I still have a nice Harley Davidson with a side car and still ride, so sometimes that helps when they hear stories that are real and offer some hope.”

# Discussion

- Themes that clearly emerge through both focus groups included:
- Individuals with a disability must be strong advocates for themselves; self reliance is absolutely critical
- An employee who has a need for accommodation(s) **must be direct and candid** when dealing with their supervisor / employer
- Knowledge is power, find out what resources, AT and workplace accommodations are out there, inform yourself
- Peer support is a very commonly used strategy, and in many instances this was reported as essential for navigating red tape, gaining knowledge and as a primary source for support.

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**Thank you!**

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