

## *BurrellesLuce Express*

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By Brandon C. Baker, The News-Herald, Willoughby, Ohio McClatchy-Tribune Regional News

Jan. 13--Recently laid-off workers and high school and college graduates are among those constantly contending for available jobs across the country. For Americans with disabilities, that competition hasn't always brought out the best in them.

According to [AccessibleEmployment.org](http://AccessibleEmployment.org), people with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in the U.S.

While U.S. Department of Labor data shows that overall population experienced a 5 percent unemployment rate in December, the same rate among disabled citizens was about nine times higher.

The U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey shows there were more than 620,000 unemployed and disabled Ohioans, ages 16 to 64.

"Employment of people with disabilities has always presented significant barriers," said Susan Pray, area manager for the Northeast Ohio Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. "It's not a new problem."

However, several entities in New Jersey, inspired by such statistics, in December created [AccessibleEmployment.org](http://AccessibleEmployment.org) to curb those numbers. It is a job search Web site modeled after the popular Monster.com and made for the disabled population.

The site, created in part by the New Jersey Leadership Network and Henry H. Kessler Foundation, also allows job seekers the opportunity to post their resume for view by employers looking to hire disabled workers.

"We thought maybe there was a single point of contact (to find out about disabled job seekers), but no one knew," said Dana Egreczky, president of [AccessibleEmployment.org](http://AccessibleEmployment.org). "So, we decided this Web site was going to be a great resource for the business community."

"We saw it as a one-stop shopping center for when employers are looking to connect with job candidates who have qualifications, but also happen to have a disability."

In five weeks, users have posted about 500 resumes and employers have posted around 300 jobs.

"The length of time people are staying on the site is over six minutes," Egreczky said. "A six-minute stay does indicate quality content."

Pray's department, an arm of the Ohio Rehabilitative Services Commission, also helps the disabled locate jobs. There are 72 counselors in the region available to help the search.

"Counselors help people make major decisions and find jobs that make the most sense for them," Pray said. "Does their disability compromise the ability to get and keep jobs? What skills and cognitive abilities do they have that we can build on?"

Between October 2006 and September, the state's RSC worked with 54,462 disabled Ohioans, with 8,744 of them successfully obtaining work. They earned an average of \$11.86 per hour while working about 33 hours

per week.

The counseling process takes an average of two years to complete before a person gets hired, said Eileen Corson, deputy director for the Ohio RSC.

"We also help them find the job and offer support to keep the job," Pray said. "We're not done with a person until at least 90 days (after they are hired), when it looks like they're going to keep the job, they're performing well and the employer is satisfied."

Pray said the unemployment rate for the incapacitated population is an unfortunate situation, but he was thankful that those citizens have more job-search weapons, like *AccessibleEmployment*, at their disposal than they would have 20 years ago.

"The advent of technology has offered people more opportunities than ever before," she said. "We also embrace the American Disabilities Act because it has opened many doors."

Like other statistics, there is no sure way to know if the numbers will swing one way or another in the near future.

"It all depends on the economy," Pray said. "We're still going to be here and we're still going to do what we do."

"We have a crew of dedicated counselors who come to work everyday -- it's a beautiful thing to watch."

FYI

For more Web-based job search information, visit [www.AccessibleEmployment.org](http://www.AccessibleEmployment.org).

For Ohio RSC information, call (866) 325-0026 or call the Painesville office at (440) 352-6271.

Web information is available at [www.rsc.ohio.gov](http://www.rsc.ohio.gov).

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***Highlights: AccessibleEmployment***