

# Connect 700: New Hope for Minnesotans with Disabilities

*The program goal is to increase the share of people with disabilities in the state government workforce.*

In celebration of National Disabilities Employment Awareness Month, Gov. Mark Dayton announced the launch of a new program in October called Connect 700. This program is intended to boost the number of people with disabilities in the state government workforce. The new program connects job seekers with disabilities to employment opportunities in state government without requiring them to go through the traditional competitive hiring process.

Job seekers with disabilities can be hired through on-the-job training. They will have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities for a position for up to 700 hours before a hiring decision is made. The program marks the state's first affirmative action-based employment policy for people with disabilities in many years. The goal is to make state government a role model for employers in Minnesota and the nation in promoting disability employment.

## Background

The percentage of people with disabilities employed in state government in Minnesota declined from 10.1 percent in 1999 to 3.9 percent in 2014. Connect 700 was originally established in 1981 to provide people with disabilities reasonable accommodations for the civil service exam. The program was revamped after Gov. Dayton signed Executive Order 14-14, which called on state agencies to reach a goal of a workforce comprised of 7 percent people with disabilities across all state government job categories.

## The Program

To participate in Connect 700, an individual must:

- Have a disability, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), that significantly impacts the individual's ability to participate in the typical selection process.

- Meet the minimum qualifications in the job posting.

- Possess a Proof of Eligibility Certificate.

Types of disabilities included are blindness, deafness, autism, learning disabilities or disabilities requiring the use of a wheelchair or other personal mobile device. Other disabilities also may qualify as long as the treating provider or vocational rehabilitation counselor indicates that the disability will have a significant or negative impact on the applicant's ability to compete in the typical selection process.

Anyone with a disability who wants to participate in the program can find the application and details about the hiring process on the Minnesota Careers website at [www.mn.gov/careers/](http://www.mn.gov/careers/) under the "Diverse Workforce" and "People with Disabilities" tabs. Once the application is completed by the applicant and treating provider or vocational rehabilitation counselor, it is then forwarded

to the Office of Inclusion and Diversity at Minnesota Management & Budget. For those eligible, a Proof of Eligibility Certificate is provided.



State agencies are required to indicate on job postings whether a vacancy is eligible for Connect 700. Generally, all permanent positions are eligible.

If hired, Connect 700 candidates will be placed in a pre-probationary trial period of 700 hours, or approximately four and a half months. This is an opportunity to receive on-the-job training and further demonstrate skills and abilities for each position. A hiring manager can move someone who successfully demonstrates qualifications for a job into the probationary period at any time before the 700 hours are completed.

The hiring manager is responsible for providing training, ongoing feedback and any needed reasonable accommodations. If a candidate is unsuccessful, a hiring manager must explain why the person was unsuccessful and what steps the manager took to assist the candidate in the job.

### Goals and Benefits

While the state's overarching goal is to increase the share of people with disabilities in the workforce, the program has other benefits as well. The state is facing heavy competition for talent due to slowing labor force growth. By 2024, projections show Minnesota will be 95,000 workers short of filling available jobs. The disability workforce is an untapped pool of talent. About 1 in 5 people have disabilities, but as many as 72 percent of these individuals are unemployed and want to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

Moreover, Connect 700 is a tool for hiring managers to help increase diversity in state government. Countless studies demonstrate that a diverse workforce delivers better products and services that more effectively meet the needs of customers or constituents. Who better to understand and

meet the needs of the state's population with disabilities than employees with disabilities?

### Conclusion

Connect 700 is an affirmative action-based policy aimed at increasing the participation of people with disabilities in the state of Minnesota's workforce. It sets clear guidance, goals and timelines for implementation, making it more likely to succeed than previous anti-discrimination-based policies.

Just two months after the launch of the program, more than 40 people have been certified as eligible for Connect 700. One agency has hired an employee through the program.

Time will tell if this program succeeds in increasing the hiring of people with disabilities. In the meantime, Connect 700 provides state agencies with the opportunity to reach talent within the disability community. The hope is that Connect 700 will not only make Minnesota a leader in hiring people with disabilities but also in serving people with disabilities. **T**