

## COVER STORY

Individuals with disabilities have among the highest rates of unemployment in the state. Meet groups and companies working to change that.

# A BOOST FOR OVERLOOKED WORKERS

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**E**ach day at 4 a.m., the machines in the Center for Disability Services' mail fulfillment center on New Karner Road start to whirl and buzz, printing out documents and mailers for clients. ¶ The Center for Disability Services is the largest disability service provider in the region, and one of the region's top employers. Its mail fulfillment center has over 100 New York State Industries for the Disabled and private contract clients, including banks, state and local agencies, insurance companies and health care providers. ¶ Around 70% of the employees are people with disabilities who work with job coaches. ¶ Employees throughout the day do mail pickup, print materials and checks, stuff envelopes and process undeliverable addresses. On a typical day, employees handle 200,000 to 300,000 pieces of mail.

Among those employees is Mark Letourneau, who has worked at the mail distribution center since 2014. Five days a week he runs up and down a long machine that sorts smaller envelopes by ZIP code, pulling the envelopes into bins before the machine gets jammed.

It's the first of the month, which Letourneau said is one of the busiest days at the center, so he's running a lot. Enough that he said he doesn't need a gym.

Greg Sorrentino, CEO of The Center for Disability Services, said he often shows off the mailroom to private businesses, to show them how successful a fully integrated workplace can function.

"The pride that these people have to have





Mail processing clerk Mark Letourneau at the Center for Disability Services mail processing center.

DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS / ABR

that job is everything to them," Sorrentino said. "They don't ever call in. They don't ever miss work. They are the most dedicated, because they know that there's not a lot of opportunities out there."

Individuals with disabilities are employed at much lower rates compared to the general population. In New York state, the employment rate for people with disabilities ages 18-64 living in the community was 33.8% in 2020, according to Census Bureau data compiled by researchers at the University of New Hampshire. For people without disabilities, it was 72.5%.

The pandemic has increased the disparities. From March 2020 to April 2021, unemployment rates for New Yorkers with dis-

abilities averaged 16.2%, an increase of 8.9% from the year before. The rate of unemployment for the general population was lower, with a monthly average of 11.3%.

It's why Maureen O'Brien, CEO of NYSID, said more private companies, and New York state, need to prioritize funding services for, and employing, people with disabilities.

"We can say we believe in diversity, equity and inclusion. We can say we want individuals with disabilities to be employed, we can say we embrace them in our company or our culture," O'Brien said. "But I think it has to go one step further and it has to be a prioritization of individuals with disabilities."

O'Brien's organization is dedicated to

## BY THE NUMBERS

### \$6.7 billion

Reported revenues of 427 of New York's nonprofit disability service providers in 2019

### Capital Region state:

### 135,171

People in the region who have a disability

### 12.7%

Share of people in the region with a disability

### 37.0%

Employment rate of people with disabilities

### 79.8%

Employment rate of people with no disability

### \$222,185,592

Payroll of disability service providers in region

All data according to Rockefeller Institute of Government Report



Greg Sorrentino, CEO of The Center for Disability Services



Maureen O'Brien, CEO of NYSID

creating more than 6,000 jobs for people with disabilities at member agencies across the state. These organizations have a multibillion-dollar economic impact, but for years, she said the state didn't prioritize these individuals.

In 2019, NYSID and the NY Alliance for Inclusion & Innovation commissioned the Rockefeller Institute of Government to quantify how much disability service providers contributed to the economy.

The report found the state's 427 providers supported about 200,000 jobs in New York, generating \$14 billion in economic output, including \$6.7 billion in provider revenue.

The report got new Gov. Kathy Hochul's attention. For the first time in ages, O'Brien said there's support at the highest levels of state government.

"This is new. This is not something that's happened before," O'Brien said. "And in fact, there has been a decade of really no investment in this space in the previous administration."

Hochul outlined her prioritization of individuals with disabilities in her State of the State address and in the budget, creating an Office of the Advocate for Individuals with Disabilities. She's also committed to hiring 1,200 individuals with disabilities.

O'Brien and others are pushing for more, including adequate funding for state programs that would allow more residents with disabilities to find employment and increased pay for direct care workers. One piece of legislation would allow NYSID to have ratios of individuals with disabilities to non-disabled at 50%, so individuals with disabilities would be working side by side with non-disabled individuals.

O'Brien wants to work with more private businesses too.

"We think that companies, specifically ones that want to be socially conscious and socially responsible about their spend, could diversify their supply chains and do business with us," O'Brien said. "Many companies diversify their supply chains and put a priority on doing business with MWBEs. We think they can do the same thing with prioritizing individuals with disabilities."

Jason Packer put acquisition opportunities on hold last year when an opportunity came for Hill & Markes to partner with NYSID.

NYSID wanted to shift the warehouse distribution and delivery of its products to a company eager to employ people with disabilities. Packer, CEO of Hill & Markes, wanted to build a more diverse team at the third-generation family business.

"We had Covid and supply chain issues and we didn't know yet that there would be labor issues too. We had other projects in the queue to execute on," Packer said. "We decided to move forward on the project with NYSID instead of those mergers. It felt like it was in line with our goals."

A lot has changed since the 116-year-old company was founded delivering candy, ice cream and cones by horse and buggy to Gloversville. Hill & Markes today has 180 employees and a fleet of more than 40

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tractor-trailers delivering janitorial, industrial packaging, food service, ice cream and office supplies to large and small businesses in New York state north of Westchester County.

After 2020, Packer recognized the company needed to create a more diverse, equitable and inclusive culture. He set a goal of having 25% of Hill & Markes' employees be made up from communities of color, people with disabilities and veterans.

It's part of why he prioritized taking over NYSID's distribution and delivery operations, which wasn't easy. The integration took six months, including investment in new infrastructure and equipment at Hill

& Markes' Amsterdam facility and a shift in perspective to allow for more flexibility in an integrated workplace.

"If we decided to go with an acquisition of another company in our industry, it would have been an easier, more natural fit for the company," Packer said. "My dad [chairman Neal Packer] has done half a dozen of those acquisitions, but this was outside of the box and different and harder. We felt it was more fulfilling and in line with who we are and what we want to do in the future."

Almost a year into the partnership with NYSID, Packer said Hill & Markes is getting ready for phase two, which involves working together to open business for NYSID and Hill & Markes as a partnership in the private sector.

*Larry Halett, left, with Jason Packer, CEO of Hill & Markes. Halett came from Liberty ARC and has worked at Hill & Markes for 15 years.*

"We're reaching out to organizations that care about diversity, equity and inclusion who see this as an important step in providing opportunities to people with disabilities," Packer said.

He has five employees now with disabilities working in different jobs within Hill & Markes. One employee receives and puts products away in its warehouse and uses a picking machine to take the products and put them into the bins. An intern helps with marketing with videography and getting content onto the company website.

Another employee starting this month will be preparing, testing and cleaning large equipment to be sent out to customers.

Packer said it's changed his perspective on how to be flexible in the workplace, and how they'll recruit employees going forward.

"It's not only that this initiative with NYSID has changed our perspective, but the fact that we have a labor shortage in America," Packer said. "Expanding your pool of applicants and your concept of who can be doing the work in your company is critical right now, and into the future."

Walking through the Center for Disability Services mail fulfillment center, Sorrentino said he often points out how tough it is to tell who may or may not have a disability because the organization holds everyone to the same high standards.

Sorrentino said he's seen businesses bring in employees with disabilities that ultimately change the culture of the organization for the better.

"We try to say to [private businesses], you have to have the expectations you have to have. You can't lower your standards and we're not expecting you to," Sorrentino said. "All you need to do is give someone a chance and understand that you may have to make some accommodations."

That's how the mail fulfillment center has been operating for decades, generating revenues that are then reinvested to support deficits in its health clinic.

"We all have our good days and bad days, right? But sometimes you need that little reminder that we take work for granted. These individuals don't because they have to work a little bit harder, oftentimes to get to the same spot – if they're given the chance at all," Sorrentino said.

"We always like being around somebody happy and proud."

## LABOR CRISIS

## THE 23,000-JOB GAP DIRECTLY IMPACTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Greg Sorrentino at the Center for Disability Services, like many employers, is facing a hiring crisis. The jobs he's looking to fill are critical to the health and well-being of people with disabilities: direct support professionals.

"At our high point, we're 2,500 employees, so we're down 15% or 20%," Sorrentino said. "That's a lot of people."

But it's not just a problem for the Center for Disability Services, but for service providers across New York state. With that direct care worker employment gap, it makes it harder for people with disabilities to get their basic needs met, let alone someone to help get them ready for work.

Michael Seereiter, who leads the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation, said

there's been a neglect in this sector for years that has led to the current hiring crisis.

"We had about 100,000 employees in this in the entire system where now we are down 23,000 and change," Seereiter said. "That means that the staff who do remain there are working extra hours or working overtime. I have far too many examples of executive directors of these organizations and their lead staff doing direct care work."

The alliance has about 150 provider organizations around the state and is mostly focused on policy and advocacy work before the state. His organization has been pushing for higher pay for these direct care workers, who he said make less than fast-food workers.



*Michael Seereiter, president and CEO of the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation*

Seereiter said the lack of direct care workers impacts people with disabilities who need assistance accomplishing basic needs, such as helping a person transfer from a wheelchair to a toilet, or a wheelchair to a bed, and helping someone eat.

It then becomes harder to schedule workers to help people with other needs necessary to make them feel like they're a part of a community, such as going to the mall or bowling and helping them get ready for work.

"If you don't take care of the basics, eating, sleeping safely, you don't get to the self-actualization part," Seereiter said. "I'd like to work. I'd like to support my community."