

Increasing Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities:  
An Analysis of the Connect 700 Program and Legislation in the State of Minnesota

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Sumukha Terakanambi  
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*Signature below of Paper Supervisor certifies successful completion of oral presentation **and** completion of final written version:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Maria Hanratty Paper Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date, oral presentation

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date, paper completion

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mr. Kevin Parker, Committee Administrator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Minnesota Senate

Signature of Second Committee Member, certifying successful completion of professional paper

**Subject Keywords:** Disability, Employment, State as Model Employer Policies, Connect 700, Legislation

**Abstract:** Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, employment remains a barrier for people with disabilities. Large disparities in employment rates between people with and without disabilities continue to persist. In response to this issue, policymakers have developed State as Model Employer policies. The Connect 700 program is one such policy within the Minnesota state government that offers an alternative non-competitive process for qualified individuals with disabilities. Participants have an on-the-job demonstration of up to 700 hours to showcase their skills and abilities while allowing supervisors to make more informed hiring decisions. The aim of this paper is to (1) provide background on the C700 program including a brief history, the application process, and essential components of the program (2) present quantitative data from various reports regarding the C700 program and incorporate interview data (3) provide an interpretation of the data and describe the current issues with the C700 program and (4) provide background on recently proposed legislation, summarize the provisions of the legislation, and analyze how the provisions of the legislation address the current issues facing the C700 program. I will end with a discussion which will include the reason why the state legislature should pass the legislation, the prospects of the legislation passing, and the limitations with my approach where I will emphasize the importance of better data collection.

## Executive Summary

The Connect 700 program within the Minnesota State Government is a State as Model Employer Policy (SAME) that provides an alternative noncompetitive process for qualified people with disabilities interested in state government work. Eligible participants of the program can complete an on-the-job demonstration of up to 700 hours to showcase their skills and abilities while allowing supervisors to make more informed hiring decisions. The purpose of this program is to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities who have been previously overlooked in the traditional competitive process due to bias or an aspect of their disability. By increasing the number of people with disabilities in the state government workforce, Minnesota state government agencies can better reflect the populations they serve and set an example for other sectors to follow. Additionally, since state agencies often make decisions that impact Minnesotans, having people with disabilities involved in the decision-making process would enhance the effectiveness of the state at serving its constituents.

Considering the importance of policies like the Connect 700 program, my paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the Connect 700 program's impact on overall employment trends, hiring, and retention of people with disabilities?
2. What are the experiences of participants going through the Connect 700 program?
3. Has implementation of the Connect 700 program been consistent?
  - a. Do all state agencies process accommodation requests effectively?
  - b. How effectively is MMB providing leadership and guidance?
  - c. How effective are the ADA coordinators within state agencies?
4. Do supervisors understand their responsibilities within the Connect 700 program and receive adequate training on program components?
5. Has adequate data been collected on the Connect 700 program?

To answer these questions, I will utilize previously collected quantitative data from Minnesota Management and Budget, the Star Tribune, the State Task Force Report on Hiring and Retention of Employees with Disabilities, state agency Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) reports, the Minnesota Council on Disability, and a program evaluation from Wilder Research. The results from these reports will be shown in tables and figures. I will also highlight other important statistics contained in the reports. Additionally, I will utilize qualitative data to supplement the quantitative data. This data will include interviews of Connect 700 participants conducted prior to this research by Kevin Parker, a committee administrator and former legislative assistant to Senator John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin. I will also include an interview I conducted with Ken Rodgers, the Disability Programs Coordinator and Designee of the Title I ADA Coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The experiences of participants and major themes will be briefly described.

The results show that the Connect 700 program, while having a modest impact in increasing the percentage of people with disabilities in state government, has many issues that affect its overall effectiveness. These issues include low hiring and retention of program participants through the Connect 700 program, workplace discrimination, inconsistent implementation of the program, lack of supervisor training, and poor data collection.

Based on these results, I will discuss legislation that was proposed in 2020 to strengthen the Connect 700 program and provide more comprehensive training. In the most recent legislative session, the legislation was reintroduced as SF 1261. The legislation would essentially codify recommendations from the State Task Force report and executive orders from the Walz and Dayton administrations. Using the official bill language from the Office of the Revisor in the Minnesota State Legislature, I will summarize the major provisions of the bill and describe how these provisions address specific issues revealed in the evidence. The bill would provide oversight and accountability structures to improve implementation and address discrimination, mandate comprehensive training for employees including supervisors, hiring managers, and HR personnel, and require better data collection to adequately monitor the program.

I will end with a discussion section where I argue that the legislation must pass the state legislature because of how it addresses gaps in the current program and would improve employment outcomes in the long run. I will also explain the limitations of my approach and areas where further research is needed.

### **Literature Review**

Since 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been the law of the land. It was the first landmark civil rights law that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in all aspects of public life and established minimum standards of accessibility for public places. The intention of the law was to not only safeguard the rights of people with disabilities but also promote equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities (Gould & Harris, 2019). Unfortunately, employment for people with disabilities remains a significant issue. As a disability rights advocate put it “employment really hasn’t changed. We cannot seem to break that barrier. Whatever is going on with employment, we are just not hitting it” (Disability Rights Advocate, personal communication, Oct. 21, 2022). This sentiment that employment outcomes have not improved is the result of large disparities that continue to exist nationally and in the state of Minnesota. Research has consistently shown that people with disabilities struggle to get and maintain employment. This has effectively led to a decline in opportunities to earn wages, has reduced access to employer-provided insurance, has limited the ability of people with disabilities to find purpose in their lives, and has reduced their social capital (Blick et al., 2015).

In the last 10 years, the employment rate for people with disabilities has stayed around 30-40% compared to around 70-80% for people without a disability (Wright & Klimkina, 2022). Naturally, this has led to significant poverty and economic insecurity for this population. The poverty rate for people with disabilities is 2 times greater than the poverty rate for people without disabilities (Lake et al., 2021). Additionally, people with disabilities are more likely to have an annual household income of less than \$15,000. This economic disadvantage has also contributed to worse health outcomes for people with disabilities (Krahn et al., 2015). In the state of Minnesota, the story is not much better. Only 30% of Minnesotans with disabilities are employed and the unemployment rate is more than double that of Minnesotans without disabilities. As a result, about 23.7% of Minnesotans with disabilities live below the poverty line (State of Minnesota, 2018).

Many people would assume that these statistics reveal that people with disabilities are unable to work because of their disability and therefore this is the primary reason for these disparities. However, survey data has demonstrated that of those people with disabilities who are not currently working, 72% have a desire to work (State of Minnesota, 2018). What is more, is that people with disabilities encounter several workplace barriers. The primary barrier is issues with securing reasonable accommodations. Reasonable accommodations are defined as appropriate modifications or adjustments to a workspace that does not produce an undue burden on employers. The intention is to ensure that people with disabilities can participate on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2022).

The provision of reasonable accommodations has received some attention in scholarly literature. First, studies have focused on the reluctance of employers to hire people with disabilities due to their responsibility to provide accommodations. Researchers in one study approached HR professionals and managers from businesses and government entities that were known to be unwilling to hire people with disabilities. Using questionnaires, they collected responses regarding the reasons why employers were not hiring people with disabilities. Results showed that many respondents believed that it was a lack of knowledge on disability issues and providing accommodations, concern over cost, and fear of legal liability (Kaye et al., 2011).

Second, research has investigated these issues from the perspective of employees with disabilities who have cited negative social attitudes and a lack of proper accommodations as major barriers. Researchers conducted interviews with employees with disabilities in an employment training program in Canada. Through these interviews the researchers found that in addition to a lack of support, employees felt that they faced discrimination by their employers, were labeled because of their disability, and felt that their skills were being dismissed (Shier, 2009). Another study examined the experiences of people with disabilities who went through the accommodation process in their workplaces. The researchers located several impediments which made it hard to secure accommodations. This included a lack of support from supervisors, poor understanding of the ADA from employers, perceptions of unfair treatment, and various systemic and physical barriers (Dong, 2022). A third study of professionals in leadership positions within the public sector in the UK revealed similar experiences. Respondents in the interviews discussed how HR professionals had no idea about the effects of their disability on their work which led to inadequate accommodations. Respondents also described how their abilities were overlooked, how diversity initiatives failed to consider the resources involved in improving workplace accessibility, and how the culture of organizations failed to incorporate people with disabilities (Wilson-Kovacs 2008).

As the literature suggests, people with disabilities in the United States and comparable peer nations struggle to secure accommodations in the workplace and face discriminatory attitudes from supervisors. This limits their ability to maintain employment and experience career advancement. Given the gravity of the situation and the barriers that people with disabilities face, policymakers have developed various policies to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for people with disabilities.

Specifically, many states are implementing State as a Model Employer (SAME) policies to increase the representation of people with disabilities in the state government workforce. These policies are beneficial because people with disabilities provide an untapped pool of talent for both public and private sector employers and improve the competitive advantage of state governments (Wright and

Klimkina, 2022). The most recent evidence suggests that about 20 states including the District of Columbia have adopted SAME policies and over 100 pieces of legislation were proposed throughout the country during the 2022 legislative session. Key elements of these policies include adopting formal mechanisms to designate the state as a model employer, establishing task forces to address employment issues early on in policy development, providing training for supervisors, ensuring access to personal assistance services for employees with disabilities, implementing reasonable accommodation policies to retain employees, and creating more accessible application processes through fast track hiring systems (Wright and Klimkina, 2022).

Research has examined the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In 2010, the Obama administration issued Executive Order 13548 which called on federal agencies to hire an additional 100,000 individuals with disabilities by 2015. To reach this goal, the Executive Order called for the increased utilization of Schedule A Excepted Hiring Authority for Persons with Disabilities. Like Connect 700, Schedule A offers a noncompetitive appointment process for qualified people with disabilities. According to an analysis by the Government Accountability Office, the federal government exceeded their goal by hiring 143,600 individuals with disabilities between 2011 and 2015 and an additional 79,600 between 2016 and 2017. The three agencies with steady increases in employment of people with disabilities (DOJ, SSA, and SBA) incorporated Schedule A training. However, the report recommended that agencies do more to measure the impacts of training (GAO, 2020).

Another report by the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the Department of Labor examined the impacts of various policies that employers from several industries used to hire and retain employees with disabilities. Using logistic regression models, researchers found that mechanisms such as developing measurable goals for hiring people with disabilities, making interview locations accessible, actively recruiting people with disabilities, and having an accessible application process increased the probability of hiring a person with a disability over a 12-month period (Gasper et al., 2019).

Some research has discussed the effectiveness of workplace diversity training, which is an important component of programs aiming to improve employment for people with disabilities. Researchers in one study asked supervisors and HR personnel what they believed would address the reluctance to hire people with disabilities. Around 60% expressed that guidance on disability and accommodation issues and hiring a diversity specialist would be very helpful (Kaye et al., 2011). Another study surveyed 675 employers from several industries to learn more about the implementation of disability policies. Between 41% and 45% of employers rated four disability-training policies including training for staff on legal requirements, disability awareness training, interview training for supervisors, and training for other employees as effective (Erickson et al., 2014). Finally, one study conducted a systematic review of literature looking at the effectiveness of disability and diversity training. The studies included in the paper showed that longer training sessions, higher frequency of sessions, making sessions interactive, incorporating goals and mentoring, debunking myths, increasing knowledge of the ADA, and gaining buy-in from upper-level management all had positive impacts on hiring and retention of individuals with disabilities (Phillips et al., 2016).

### **Connect 700 Background**

## ***Overview***

In the state of Minnesota, the Connect 700 program is a SAME program that provides an alternative noncompetitive process for qualified people with disabilities to obtain state government work. The purpose of the program is to remove barriers that have existed for people with disabilities in the traditional competitive process by giving people with disabilities the opportunity for an on-the-job trial of up to 700 hours to demonstrate their skills and abilities to their supervisors. Ultimately this kind of program promotes more informed hiring decisions and results in lower turnover (State of Minnesota, 2018).

This program was designed to address the declining share of Minnesota employees who identified as a person with a disability, which decreased from 10% of employees in 1999 to 3.7% by 2013. (Mourssi-Alfash, 2016). There are several reasons for the decline. First, many state agencies stopped collecting hiring and recruitment data and failed to include disability specific goals in affirmative action plans (Serres, 2020). Second, Ken Rodgers, the Disability Programs Coordinator and Designee of the Title I ADA Coordinator at MNDOT, discussed that many job postings had requirements for the job that were discriminatory, effectively disqualifying people with disabilities from being included in the eligible pool of applicants. Ken also mentioned that few people with disabilities were getting past the panel interview, a standard component of the traditional competitive process. Ken explained that this was due to bias against applicants and the fact that some disabilities caused people who were otherwise qualified to be unsuccessful with the panel interview format (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

To increase access to employment for people with disabilities, Ken and the other advocates developed the Connect 700 program to allow people to get around the panel interview and instead demonstrate their skills on the job through a trial work period. In 2014, Governor Mark Dayton signed an executive order requiring state agencies to implement the Connect 700 program to increase the percentage of people with disabilities in the state government workforce to 7% (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023). Following the enactment of the Executive Order, the Connect 700 program was officially implemented within the Minnesota state government in 2016 (Lindberg et al., 2021). Later, in 2019, following concerns about the functioning of the program, Governor Tim Walz signed another executive order expressing the importance of recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining qualified individuals with disabilities. He renewed efforts to make even more strides by establishing the goal that 10% of the workforce in state agencies be comprised of people with disabilities (Walz, 2019).

### ***Eligibility Process for Individuals with Disabilities***

The Connect 700 manual provides information on how the Connect 700 program works. To be eligible, the person applying for employment needs to have a disability that prevents them from demonstrating their skills and abilities in a more traditional competitive selection process (State of Minnesota, 2018). The applicant must complete an Application for Eligibility form where they provide basic information and a letter from an authorized medical or vocational rehabilitation professional that can verify their disability. This form is then submitted via email to Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB). MMB is the agency tasked with providing training to managers, human resource professionals, and individuals with disabilities to educate them about the Connect 700 program. The Equal Opportunity Unit within MMB is the entity that processes applications for the program and determines if the applicant meets the eligibility criteria. They then provide the applicant with a Certificate of

Eligibility which can be used for up to two years to apply for state agency jobs. This certificate will be sent in an accessible format with an expiration date. The email will also include next steps to follow once the person is approved to participate in the program (State of Minnesota, 2018).

Once the person is deemed eligible, there is a specific process for applying for positions within state government. When an applicant is applying for a position, they must apply through the State of Minnesota Careers Website. It is important that the applicant's materials demonstrate how they meet the minimum qualifications for the position as well as preferred qualifications. However, to officially express interest in the position, the applicant must send their Certificate of Eligibility to the contact person that is listed on the job posting before the position is closed (State of Minnesota, 2018).

#### ***Duties of Recruiters, Human Resource Representatives, Hiring Managers, and Supervisors***

Within this process recruiters/human resource representatives, hiring managers, and supervisors have specific roles. Once an application is received along with the Certificate of Eligibility the recruiter or HR representative first verifies that the certificate is valid and then ensures that the person meets the minimum qualifications and other eligibility criteria. If they deem the person eligible, they will then forward the application to the hiring manager. The hiring manager is required to consider a Connect 700 participant before anyone in the competitive applicant pool. They are then encouraged to offer a noncompetitive interview. A non-competitive interview means that the hiring manager meets with the Connect 700 applicant in an informal setting. This provides an opportunity for the applicant to learn more about the duties that the position entails and for hiring managers to get a sense of the applicant's skills and experiences (State of Minnesota, 2018). After the interview, if the manager decides to offer the position, they will hire the individual for a pre-probationary appointment (700-hour trial period) while letting others know that the position has been filled. It is important for the hiring managers not to disclose that the person is a Connect 700 applicant. Since the applicant has been hired to a Connect 700 position they are treated as employees and are therefore covered by the agency's compensation plan (State of Minnesota, 2018).

Throughout the process, the supervisors should schedule regular meetings with the Connect 700 employees to make sure that everything is going well and are also encouraged to provide frequent feedback to help the employees improve and grow. If an employee adequately demonstrates their ability to do the job even before the 700 hours has been completed, the supervisor can consult with the HR department to recommend the employee for probationary appointment. A probationary appointment means that the individual has been officially hired at the state agency and will receive additional supervision for 3 to 6 months. To recommend the individual for an official position, the supervisor must complete the final check-in section of the Participant Review Form, submit it to the human resource office, and notify the Equal Opportunity Unit within MMB (State of Minnesota, 2018).

#### ***Other Components of the Program***

Another role that is important to discuss is the role of the ADA coordinator within state agencies. All state agencies have ADA coordinators to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Specifically, they are tasked with supporting employees and people with disabilities. They accomplish this task by prohibiting discrimination in all aspects of employment as well as in public services, programs, and activities. Additionally, they ensure that reasonable accommodations and modifications are provided for employees with disabilities to allow for full participation in the agency. In



terms of the Connect 700 program, the ADA coordinator is required to reach out to the Connect 700 participant and secure accommodations for them during the noncompetitive interview and once they are hired as a Connect 700 employee (Lindberg, 2021). As this information indicates, ADA coordinators are crucial to ensuring that the process for the Connect 700 applicant runs smoothly and that they have the support they need while applying and while going through the on-the-job trial.

In addition to the roles of various personnel, there are also mechanisms in place to ensure that accommodations can be feasibly implemented in the workplace. For example, Minnesota has a central accommodation fund where funds are approved through the biennial state budget and managed by the Commissioner of Administration. This fund can be utilized by state agencies to receive reimbursements of up to \$1,000 for expenses related to an employee's accommodation needs. The fund is intended to ensure that accommodations can be secured to promote a more inclusive workplace. A total of \$143,000 in reimbursements from state agencies were approved in 2018 (Wright & Klimkina, 2022). As this information suggests, the cost of accommodations can be covered through state funding reducing fears by supervisors that the accommodation will be too costly to provide for employees.

### **Analytic Approach**

In this paper, my goal is to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the Connect 700 program's impact on overall employment trends, hiring, and retention of people with disabilities?
2. What are the experiences of participants going through the Connect 700 program?
3. Has implementation of the Connect 700 program been consistent?
  - a. Do all agencies process accommodation requests effectively?
  - b. How effectively is MMB providing leadership and guidance to agencies?
  - c. How effective are the ADA coordinators within state agencies?
4. Do supervisors understand their responsibilities within the Connect 700 program and receive adequate training on program components?
5. Has adequate data been collected on the Connect 700 program?

To answer these questions, I have employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the Connect 700 Program. First, I will be utilizing previously collected quantitative data from MMB presentations and reports, the Star Tribune, ADA reports, the State Task Force Report on Hiring and Retention of Employees with disabilities, the Minnesota Council on Disability, and a program evaluation from Wilder Research. I will present the results by incorporating tables, figures, and highlighting other important statistics. Second, I will be relying on qualitative data from interviews with Connect 700 participants previously conducted by Kevin Parker and an interview I conducted with Ken Rodgers. I will then present a brief description of the participant experiences and the major themes that emerged. Finally, I will interpret the results that have been presented.

Based on the results of the data, I will also discuss recently proposed legislation that attempts to strengthen the program. To accomplish this, I will use the official bill language from the Connect 700 legislation which includes the status of the legislation and the coauthors. I will then summarize and analyze the major provisions of the bill.

## Quantitative Results

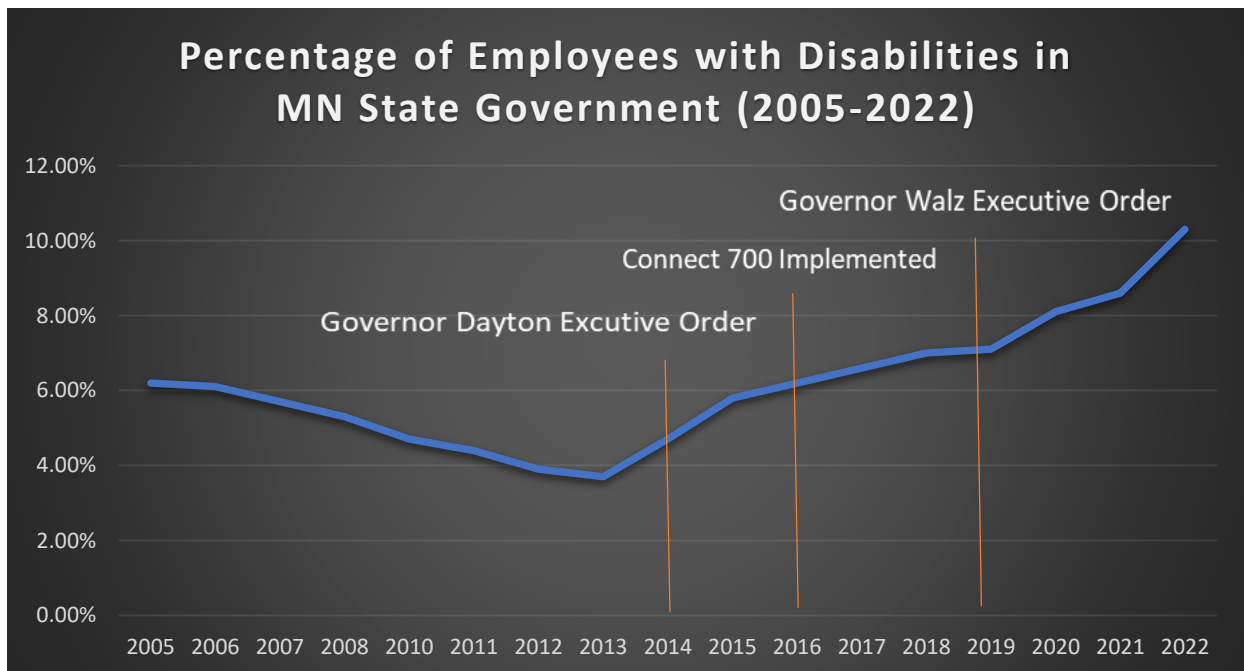
### Trends in Employment of People with Disabilities

I used data from MMB workforce reports and the MMB Dashboard to show the trend in the employment of people with disabilities in Minnesota state government overtime. The MMB state workforce reports include annual demographic information about the state government workforce (Minnesota Legislative Library, 2023). The MMB Dashboard reports the percentage of people with disabilities working in state government and includes the years that are absent from the workforce reports (MMB, 2023). This is useful information because it shows the potential impacts of the Connect 700 program on overall employment trends.

**Figure 1** presents the percentages of people with disabilities in the Minnesota state government from 2005- 2022. In addition, the years when the executive orders were issued and the year of the Connect 700 program's implementation are included. Since the programs' implementation in 2016, the percentage of employees with disabilities has increased from 6.6% to 10%. For additional context, this means that in 2016, 2,307 out of 34,964 employees had a disability and in 2022, 3,600 out of 36,000 employees had a disability (Minnesota Legislative Library, 2023). The general trend indicates that the executive orders and Connect 700 program may have contributed to the increase in the percentage of people with disabilities.

However, the percentages could be inflated making it appear that the Minnesota state government surpassed the disability employment targets of 7% and 10% contained in the executive orders. This is because the data is not disaggregated and could include employees who did not have a disability when hired but later aged into disability status or had a temporary disability.

**Figure 1:** Trend in Disability Employment in MN State Government (MMB Dashboard and State Workforce Reports)



## **Impact of Connect 700 on Hiring and Retention**

To gain a better understanding of the potential impacts of the Connect 700 program on hiring, I used a presentation from Minnesota Management and Budget that reported the total number of people participating in the Connect 700 program, the number who got hired to the pre-probationary period (700-hour on-the-job demonstration), and the number of pre-probationary appointments that were converted to probationary appointments between 2016 and 2018 (Stein, 2018). An article from the Star Tribune provides more updated information released by MMB in 2020 (Serres, 2020). Finally, the Minnesota Council on Disability provides some brief information about retention (MCD, 2023). This data is useful as it provides an overview of the hiring and retention of people with disabilities who participate in the Connect 700 program.

**Table 1** presents Connect 700 hiring data since the start of the program in 2016. Between 2016 and 2018, about 23% of Connect 700 participants were hired into pre-probationary positions. Additionally, only 47% of individuals in pre-probationary positions were converted to probationary status. In 2020, around 20% of individuals with disabilities who were eligible to participate in the program got hired as a Connect 700 employee. Currently, around 12% of total participants remain employed within state government. In other words, out of 1,500 certificates issued only 200 individuals made it past the 700 hours and are still working. Finally, an internal study of the program found that 50% of individuals hired leave within the first year (MCD, 2023).

This data further suggests that the Connect 700 program because of the low percentage of participants being officially hired is likely not having much of an impact on the overall employment trend at this point.

**Table 1:** Certificates Issued and Participants Hired

<b>Year</b>	<b>2016-2018</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b># of C700 certificates issued</b>	852	1500
<b># of C700 appointments (pre-probationary)</b>	195	300
<b># of probationary appointments (officially hired)</b>	92	200

## **Employee Experiences**

To provide a snapshot of employee experiences within state government, I used the State Task Force Report on Hiring and Retention of Employees with Disabilities which was presented to the state legislature. Back in 2019, the Minnesota State Legislature passed the State Government Omnibus Bill. This bill included a provision which created the State Task Force on Hiring and Retention of Employees with Disabilities. The task force was required to investigate employment for people with disabilities and provide recommendations to the state legislature by February 2021 (Minnesota Council on Disability, 2023). As part of this report, there was an exit survey of 112 individuals with disabilities that asked questions regarding individuals' overall experiences with state agency employment and reasons for separating from state employment (Advisory Task Force, 2021). This report is important since it provides a sense of the general experiences of working in state government for people with disabilities and includes the perspective of people with disabilities.

The survey asked respondents their level of agreement with several statements related to their workplaces. **Table 2** shows the results of this portion of the exit survey. The exit survey data reveals that a higher percentage of employees with disabilities compared to all employees disagreed that their supervisors valued their work, supervisors treated them fairly and with respect, supervisors helped them with their career growth, supervisors provided them with constructive feedback, they had the tools and resources they needed to be successful, they felt comfortable expressing their opinions to their supervisors, and their work unit was a positive environment. The report also reveals that 25% of employees with disabilities expressed some dissatisfaction with their state agencies compared to 17% for all employees (Advisory Task Force, 2021).

**Table 2:** Percentage of people with disabilities who somewhat or strongly disagreed with workplace statements.

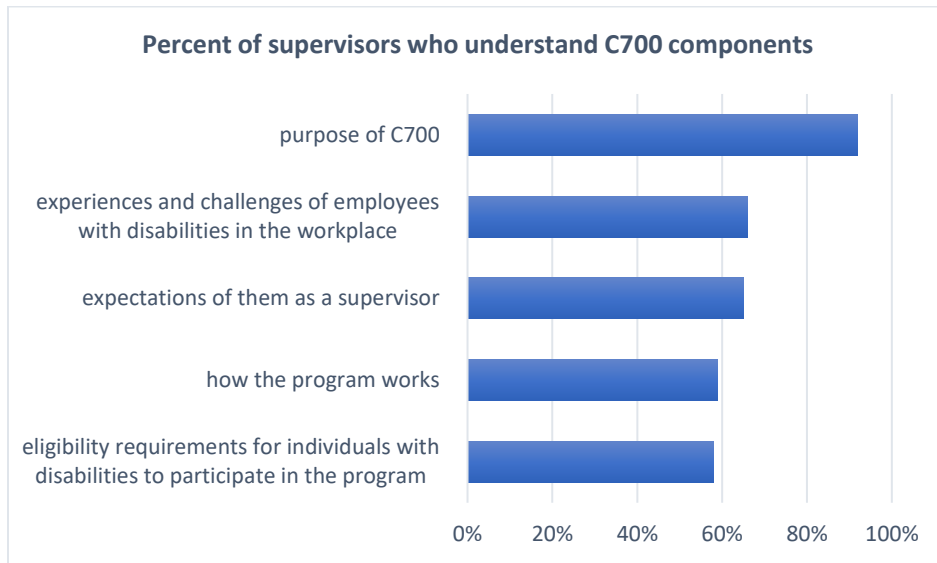
Workplace Statements	# of all employees	# of employees with disabilities
<b>My supervisor recognized me for my work effort.</b>	17.7%	28.9%
<b>I had the resources and tools to be successful.</b>	19%	28.9%
<b>My work unit was a positive environment.</b>	24.5%	35.1%
<b>My supervisor helped me plan my career growth.</b>	30.3%	40.4%
<b>My supervisor provided me constructive feedback.</b>	17.7%	27.2%
<b>My supervisor treated me fairly.</b>	14%	22.8%
<b>My supervisor treated me with respect.</b>	13.5%	21.9%
<b>I felt comfortable expressing my opinions to my supervisor</b>	20.9%	28.9%

### **Supervisor Understanding of Program Components and Training Received**

To show supervisors’ understanding of the Connect 700 program and the training they receive, I used an internal program evaluation conducted by Wilder Research. The researchers at Wilder asked both participants and supervisors to respond to several survey questions regarding knowledge of responsibilities, training received, and support provided to employees with disabilities. A total of 117 supervisors were surveyed. This report is useful as it examines whether supervisors understand their roles and responsibilities within the Connect 700 program.

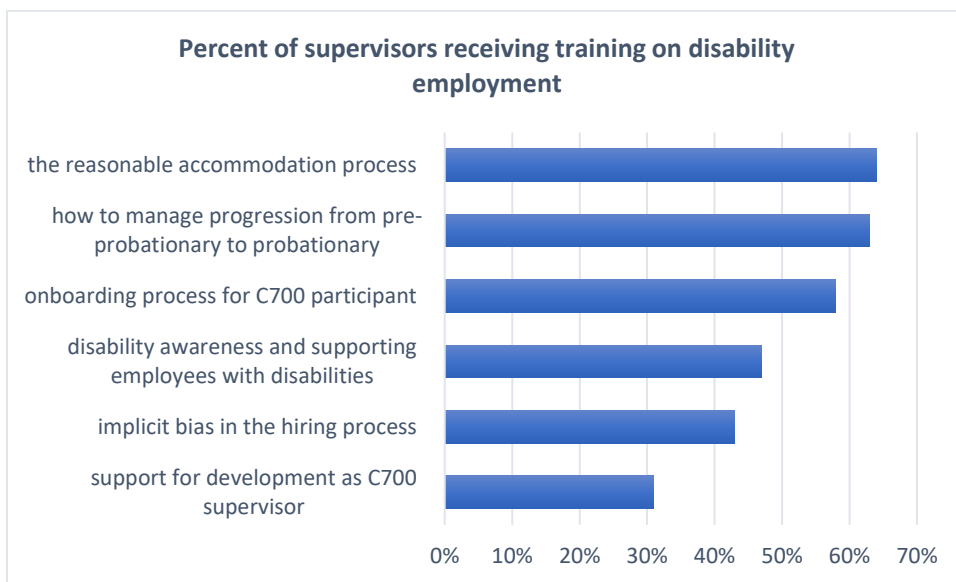
**Figure 2** shows that although 92% of supervisors stated that they understood the purpose of the Connect 700 program, a significantly lower percentage of supervisors understood specific aspects of the program. For example, only 65% of supervisors stated that they knew their responsibilities related to the program while as low as 58-59% of supervisors knew how the program worked and the eligibility requirements for a person with a disability to participate in the program (Lindberg et al., 2021). Supervisors also stated that they understood the noncompetitive interview in a theoretical sense but felt that they needed more support with the practical aspects such as preparing for, conducting, and following up after the interview.

**Figure 2: Percent of Supervisors who Understand C700 Components (Wilder Research)**



Additionally, **Figure 3** shows that 64% of supervisors stated that they received training on the accommodation process, but a significantly lower percentage said they received training specifically related to hiring, onboarding, and supervising a Connect 700 employee. In terms of the weekly meetings which is another essential component of the program, only 53% of supervisors said that they had weekly meetings with the Connect 700 employee. Finally, some supervisors were very explicit in their criticism of the program saying that it was unfair (Lindberg et al., 2021).

**Figure 3: Percent of supervisors receiving training on disability employment (Wilder Research)**



**Accommodation Requests and Approvals**

To provide insight into the accommodation processes at state agencies, I utilized ADA reports that were completed by the Department of Transportation (MNDOT) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) which show the number of accommodation requests made by employees with disabilities that were processed and approved. Reasonable accommodations are a central component of the Connect 700 program and allow people with disabilities to do their jobs. Therefore, these reports provide a useful comparison of how well an agency is implementing the Connect 700 program.

**Table 3** shows the total approved accommodation requests in FY 2019 for both agencies. Out of 599 accommodation requests at MNDOT, 598 requests were approved (Minnesota Department of Transportation, 2019). For DHS, out of 110 accommodation requests, only 77 requests were approved (Department of Human Services, 2019).

**Table 3:** Number of accommodations requested and approved by agency.

Agency	Minnesota Department of Transportation	Minnesota Department of Human Services
# of accommodation requests	599	110
# of accommodation requests approved	598	77

### ***Qualitative Results***

To supplement the quantitative data, I incorporated interviews from participants and experts in disability employment to gather additional context.

#### **Interview Data of C700 Participants**

To provide more insight into the experiences of Connect 700 participants, I utilized interview data from participants of the Connect 700 program that had been collected prior to my research by Kevin Parker, a committee administrator and former legislative assistant to Senator John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin. Over four months, he conducted 54 interviews with former participants to document the challenges they experienced going through the program. Many of the participants were either referred to him or voluntarily contacted him and agreed to be interviewed because they wanted to share their experiences and how it impacted their well-being. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, Kevin did not reveal the identity of the individuals or the specific agencies they worked at while verbally sharing his notes with me. He shared four examples that represent the range of experiences expressed by the respondents including prolonged but relatively mild cases of ignorance regarding the Connect 700 employee’s needs and instances of significant mistreatment and discrimination. This data is useful as it documents some of the issues that people faced while participating in the program and adds context to the quantitative data.

The following examples are descriptions of some of the things that were relayed to Kevin by respondents. In the first example, one of the individuals who was interviewed expressed that supervisors did not understand their needs and completely violated their privacy by casually talking about their diagnosis in front of their colleagues. Supervisors were also unable to understand why the individual needed specific accommodations for an agency-wide training and denied simple requests for

accommodations. This constant disrespect that the individual faced was prolonged and eventually led to some legal action (Kevin Parker, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

The second example concerned an individual with a disability who was doing good work and was building relationships with their co-workers. After about a month the supervisor, without any specific reasons, decided that it was not going to work out and fired the individual. (Kevin Parker, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

The third example involved an individual who experienced a traumatic event at their agency and decided to get another job to get a fresh start. The supervisor found out that they had been offered a different job and directly intervened in the process saying that they were not allowed to leave. The supervisor manipulated the individual and made them feel weak and small instead of helping them transition to their new job. Eventually, the supervisor tripled the individual's workload (Kevin Parker, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

In the final example, an individual had requested to work from home because it was getting difficult to travel to work due to their condition. Although other employees without disabilities could request to work from home, this individual's request was denied. Eventually, this person was accommodated not because of the actions of the agency but because of the COVID 19 pandemic. Later, the individual whose job it was to go through background cases, did not want to do maltreatment cases as it triggered their PTSD. They even supported their accommodation with a doctor's note and the ADA coordinator determined that the accommodation was reasonable. The agency, instead of accommodating the individual, set these types of cases as the minimum work requirement, and deemed that they could not work at the agency because they were unable to meet the minimum requirement. The individual tried to have their doctor reverse the decision but was ultimately unable to do it in time and was fired (Kevin Parker, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

### **Interview with Ken Rogers**

To understand more about the implementation of the Connect 700 program, I interviewed Ken Rodgers from MNDOT. I asked several questions to understand more about his role as the ADA coordinator, what the problems with the program were, and what his agency was doing to better retain people with disabilities. Since he worked on the program and was involved with the legislation, I asked him what the problems have been with implementation and what the benefits of the legislation would be. Ken made it clear that what he was sharing with me were opinions based on his experiences and not representative of the views of MNDOT. This data is useful as it provides the perspective of someone who has been involved with state government for several years and is also a person with a disability.

The following two themes emerged from my discussion with Ken. First, Ken gave me insight into his role as ADA Coordinator. He told me that part of the issue is that the ADA coordinator in other state agencies is a part-time position that is often added onto an HR person's role. Ken stated that ADA personnel from other agencies, "cannot devote enough energy to learn all the intricacies that one needs to have to be effective." He discussed that his primary responsibilities are to identify how a person's medical condition or disability impacts an aspect of their job and then come up with tools or strategies to address particular difficulties. He underscored that this involves a lot of time and even some negotiation with supervisors. He believes that being able to do this work all day everyday has enabled him to provide accommodations effectively (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

Second, Ken discussed the lack of leadership and guidance from MMB regarding decision-making, training, and data collection. According to Ken, MMB did not provide any guidance to state agencies, and as a result decisions were basically left up to individual agencies and even the specific ADA coordinator. This enabled state agencies to modify the program until it was significantly watered down. Furthermore, Ken explained that weekly or bi-weekly meetings between the supervisor and Connect 700 participants to discuss progress was an essential component to the success of the program because it put in place an important safety net. However, MMB decided without consulting anyone to make the ongoing communication optional. Ken said that this decision violated the concept of “nothing about us without us” which ensures that people with disabilities have a say about a program that impacts them. Ken summed up this point by saying, “if all the components of the program had been implemented and the safety net was valued and used we would not have so many people dismissed from the program” (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

In terms of training, he said that MMB had failed to communicate a common message to tell agencies exactly what should be included in the training so that every agency was on the same page. Because of this lack of communication, some agencies have not focused much on the training aspect. Ken was very clear that this was unacceptable. He even explained how he meets with supervisors at MNDOT to ensure that they understand their expectations before the Connect 700 employee starts their pre-probationary period. He also said that he requires supervisors to meet with their Connect 700 employee once a week (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

In terms of data collection, Ken described additional interactions with MMB. As someone who was instrumental in putting together the Connect 700 program, he participated in the Task Force work groups to develop strategies to hire and retain more employees with disabilities. Ken explained that a lot of the data that was requested from MMB had not been collected. When the Task Force asked for data about the Connect 700 program, MMB stalled those requests to provide the data. Specifically, regarding retention rates, the representatives from MMB had no knowledge of any data that was being collected by their agency (Ken Rodgers, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Overall, the hiring and retention rates for Connect 700 have not improved much since 2016. These extremely low hiring and retention rates suggest that the program is failing to meet the goal of improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities in Minnesota. The other data presented provides some possible reasons for these low hiring and retention rates.

The interview data provided by Kevin showed the workplace discrimination that Connect 700 participants experienced. In some instances, people with disabilities were not provided with the necessary accommodations to enable them to be successful in the workplace. In the first and fourth example, the individuals had negative experiences because even when they made requests for accommodations and provided the necessary documentation, agencies did not fulfill their responsibilities to provide accommodations and did everything they could to avoid this responsibility. In other instances, supervisors did not adequately support the individual and in some cases acted with malicious intent. In the second example, the supervisor fired an employee without providing a clear reason. Both Kevin and Ken expressed that in their experience, supervisors have often used the



individual to get 700 hours of work out of them and then hire who they want. In the third example, the supervisor actively manipulated the individual into staying at the agency and tripled their workload. The inability of agencies to address these instances of discrimination created a miserable environment for people with disabilities and denied them access to meaningful opportunities in state government.

The data also reveals the inconsistency of the Connect 700 program's implementation from agency to agency. When looking at the ADA reports, it is important to emphasize that MNDOT had a significantly higher volume of accommodation requests and still approved almost all accommodation requests made by employees with medical conditions or disabilities. As Ken mentioned in our interview, being a full-time ADA coordinator has enabled him to dedicate the time and energy needed to identify how the employee's disability impacts their job and provide the proper accommodations to support the employee. Since accommodations are vital to the success of employees with disabilities this inconsistency in the accommodation process is further hampering the success of the program. Additionally, Ken spent a lot of time in our interview discussing the lack of leadership from MMB. For any program to be successful, there must be proper oversight. MMB has unfortunately made unilateral decisions that have weakened the program and has not provided agencies with the necessary guidance to implement the program effectively.

Another key reason for low hiring and retention is a lack of supervisor training and accountability which is vital to the success of employment programs for people with disabilities. As the data has shown, employees with disabilities in state government are more likely to believe that their supervisors do not provide the proper guidance and support. The data further suggests that supervisors lack knowledge of specific aspects of the program and receive inadequate training. This failure to provide robust training across state agencies has led supervisors to not understand their role and be opposed to the program. It is also evident from my interview with Ken that incorporating the essential components of the program makes all the difference. In fact, emphasizing training is one reason why MNDOT is considered a leader in running the Connect 700 program.

Finally, it is important to have comprehensive data. The Task Force Report and Wilder Report had major limitations due to small sample sizes. Without better data on hiring and retention in the future, it will be difficult to know if the program's goals are being met and if employment outcomes for people with disabilities are improving. A lack of data will also fail to show the extent of the program's issues and potentially miss other problems impacting the Connect 700 program's success.

The issues discussed above are preventing Minnesota state government agencies from achieving more equity in the state government workforce. Therefore, people with disabilities continue to lose meaningful employment opportunities and are not involved in policy decisions at the state agency level impacting the disability community.

### **Connect 700 Legislation**

During the 2020 legislative session, Senator John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin, proposed legislation that would strengthen the Connect 700 program and expand training on the Americans with Disabilities Act throughout the state government. (Serres, 2020). The legislation aimed to adopt the

recommendations of the Advisory Task Force and codify the executive orders from the Walz and the Dayton administrations (Minnesota Council on Disability, 2023).

After failing to pass in the last two legislative sessions, the legislation has been reintroduced in the current legislative session at the Minnesota Legislature as SF 1261 and HF 0383. The chief authors of the bill are Senator Erin Maye Quade, DFL-Apple Valley, and Representative Liz Reyer, DFL- Eagan. As of this writing, the Senate version of the bill has passed out of the State and Local Government and Veterans Committee and has been re-referred to the Jobs and Economic Development Committee. The House version has been referred to the State and Local Government Finance and Policy Committee (Minnesota Legislature, 2023).

Broadly speaking, SF 1261 would improve the implementation of Connect 700, would include more training, and ensure better data collection and reporting mechanisms. These elements of the bill directly address some of the major issues outlined in my previous discussion which included workplace discrimination, lack of training, inconsistent implementation, and poor data collection.

### ***Improved Implementation***

The bill would improve the overall implementation of Connect 700 by clarifying oversight responsibilities for the Commissioner of MMB, establishing an accountability structure, and emphasizing accessibility and support. For example, Section 9 states that “The commissioner in cooperation with appointing authorities of all state agencies shall maintain an active recruiting program... special emphasis shall be given to recruitment of veterans and protected group members, including qualified individuals with disabilities” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). This means that the commissioner has a clear responsibility to ensure that the state government workforce is prioritizing the recruitment of qualified people with disabilities. Towards this end, the commissioner under Section 11, Subdivision 7, must “ensure that each agency head is aware of the accommodation fund and its critical function of removing cost considerations from interview selection decisions” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). The accommodation fund ensures that reasonable accommodations can be provided to employees with disabilities without supervisors being fearful of costs. Making sure that the commissioner is providing the information to agencies will ultimately improve the support that employees with disabilities receive. Additionally, the commissioner is tasked with hiring a statewide ADA and disability employment director who will be tasked with administering the Connect 700 program. This individual must have “education, knowledge, and skills in disability policy, employment, and the ADA.” The commissioner will also “develop, administer, and make public a formal grievance process for individuals in the 700-hour on-the-job demonstration experience” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). These responsibilities of the commissioner will ensure that there is a qualified individual that can competently oversee the program and that there is feedback coming directly from people with disabilities participating in the Connect 700 program.

In terms of affirmative action plans, each state agency will have a full-time affirmative action officer who is tasked with developing and maintaining an affirmative action plan. Each agency affirmative action plan must have procedures to ensure timely and reasonable accommodations and to enable employees with disabilities to access opportunities to advance in their career. The commissioner is required to provide a link to each agency’s affirmative action plan on the MMB website. To ensure that these plans are followed, the commissioner will “annually audit the record of each agency to determine the rate of compliance with affirmative action requirements. The commissioner must report

all audit findings to the governor if a state agency fails to meet any of its affirmative action requirements for two consecutive years” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). The commissioner’s auditing authority will ensure that there are consequences when agencies are not meeting their stated goals of supporting people with disabilities and taking steps to improve hiring and retention.

The bill also clarifies the responsibilities of the ADA coordinator. According to the bill, the head of the agency (the commissioner) will “designate an ADA coordinator who shall have primary responsibility for the administration of ADA policies, procedures, trainings, requests, and arbitration. The coordinator shall report directly to the commissioner.” The ADA coordinator will also need to have demonstrated knowledge and skills related to hiring and retaining employees with disabilities, employment laws, workforce data analysis, and strategies to promote universal and inclusive workplaces (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). This structure ensures that the ADA coordinator is directly reporting to the commissioner of each agency allowing issues to be appropriately raised and ensuring that ADA coordinators are properly equipped to assist employees with disabilities.

Finally, throughout the bill there is a clear emphasis on making sure any procedures, rules, or reports are available in digitally accessible formats (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). Enhanced accessibility will enable all employees with disabilities to participate effectively in training, to understand any proposed changes, and access important information related to the Connect 700 process. Ultimately, employees with disabilities will be aware of pertinent information and can be involved in the decision-making process.

### ***Comprehensive Training***

Another key component of the proposed legislation is ensuring that supervisors, hiring managers, and HR personnel in each agency are aware of their responsibilities to promote opportunities for people with disabilities. Specifically, in Section 18, Subdivision 2, the language of the bill states that the “commissioner is responsible for developing and coordinating consistent training policy which shall be binding on all state agencies in the executive branch. At a minimum, state employees must receive annual training on statutes or policies related to: (1) Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (2) the state's affirmative action policy (3) equal opportunity employment and (4) digital accessibility standards” (Minnesota, Legislature, 2023). This section underscores the responsibility of the commissioner of MMB to develop a standardized training curriculum that is required of all employees. Additionally, to ensure that this training program is effectively implemented in state agencies the bill states that “The programs shall include but not be limited to mandatory training and development requirements for managers and supervisors. No person shall acquire permanent status in a management or supervisory position in the classified service until training and development requirements have been met.” Furthermore, the bill articulates what supervisors should know by saying, “All managers and supervisors must receive training on inclusive work environments, disability awareness, cultural competence, and other equity and diversity areas” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). In the case of training, the bill is placing accountability mechanisms to ensure that state agencies are committed to carrying out the important components of the program. Doing so will ensure that all state agencies know the specifics about the Connect 700 program and other disability policies and clearly understand their expectations. The training materials are also subject to accessibility requirements to ensure that everyone can participate in the training.

### ***Data Collection and Reporting***

The legislation has clear requirements to ensure that robust data about the program is being collected and maintained by the commissioner of MMB. The commissioner of MMB would be required to “annually collect enterprise-wide statistics on the 700-hour on-the-job demonstration experience. The statistics collected and reported annually must include: (1) the number of certifications submitted, granted, and rejected (2) the number of applicants interviewed, appointed, and converted to probationary status (3) the number of employees retained after one year in state employment (4) the number of employees with terminated appointments and the reason for termination (5) the average length of time in an on-the-job demonstration appointment (6) the number and category of entity certifications and (7) by department or agency, the number of appointments and hires and the number of managers and supervisors trained” (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). This section of the bill lays out exactly the type of data that MMB must collect to properly monitor the Connect 700 program. The commissioner would also be required to conduct a survey of participants and supervisors. The commissioner would consult with disability experts to examine the data and develop recommendations (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). Essentially, these requirements will ensure that agencies can act on the information. Finally, the commissioner will publish this information in an annual report that is accessible to everyone (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). Providing this information will keep people informed about how the program is working and allow swift changes to be made if problems arise.

#### **Analysis: How does the bill address the current issues?**

Now that I have provided some basic information about the legislation and a summary of the important provisions, I will spend some time going over the ways that the legislation addresses specific issues that I discussed earlier in the paper.

One of the major themes that Ken mentioned during our interview was the lack of leadership and communication from MMB. The bill addresses this current deficit by clearly laying out the responsibilities for the commissioner of MMB. This specifically includes taking more leadership over designing a standard training curriculum, providing information about the accommodation fund, complying with reporting requirements, and wielding audit power to hold agencies accountable to their affirmative action goals. In terms of the training, the bill requires managers and supervisors to have knowledge of the Connect 700 program and other relevant policies. In fact, the legislation states that supervisors who fail to complete the training will no longer be in a supervisory role. The commissioner is also responsible for hiring a statewide ADA and disability employment director who is well versed in disability and employment policies. With better oversight of the program from MMB and accountability mechanisms in place, essential components of the program such as use of the accommodation fund and training will be implemented across the board. This will address the current situation where only certain agencies like MNDOT are more effective at running the program within their agency.

Additionally, to address discrimination, the legislation has included a grievance process for Connect 700 participants to voice any concerns. In many of the examples provided by Kevin, the Connect 700 employees had no recourse when they faced mistreatment in the workplace. This meant that supervisors were not held accountable for their actions and Connect 700 employees were left without any options. This provision adds another layer of accountability for supervisors and allows people with disabilities to notify agency officials if issues arise.

Furthermore, Ken mentioned in our interview that the ADA coordinator position in other agencies is not full-time and often added on to an existing role. He spent some time providing an overview of the dedication it takes to ensure a strong accommodation process. Given the time commitment and the competencies required by the position, Ken stressed that this had to be a full-time position. The bill directly addresses this issue by providing stronger requirements for agency ADA coordinators and allowing them to report directly to the commissioner. Having an effective ADA coordinator is crucial to the program's success and results in employees with disabilities getting accommodations in a timely manner.

Finally, Ken mentioned issues with data collection during the Task Force meetings. The bill also directly addresses these issues and ensures consistent input from Connect 700 participants. Some highlights include keeping records of hiring, retention rates after one year, the number of terminations and the specific reasons, and the number of managers and supervisors trained. The commissioner is also required to administer a survey so Connect 700 participants can provide their experiences and supervisors can also weigh in. With this data, there will be more enhanced monitoring of the program to observe if benchmarks are being met. Knowing the status of the program would give policymakers insight into strategies to continually improve the effectiveness of the program.

### **Discussion**

As this paper has shown, the Connect 700 program faces many challenges related to training received by supervisors, workplace discrimination, varying implementation of the program, and inadequate data. Unfortunately, people with disabilities continue to face workplace discrimination through a failure to provide reasonable accommodations and a general lack of support from supervisors. This discrimination denies them the dignity they deserve and negatively impacts their livelihoods. Additionally, supervisors often do not have a basic understanding of how to support employees with disabilities in the workplace. Some supervisors believe that providing the same supports to everyone is fair but fail to understand that accommodations enable people with disabilities to thrive in the workplace. Furthermore, there continues to be inconsistent implementation from agency to agency. Some agencies, such as MNDOT, are recognized as leaders due to their effective implementation of the program and commitment to supporting employees with disabilities. Finally, the lack of proper data collection makes it difficult to fully understand the extent of the issues with the program and to make informed decisions on how to improve it.

The legislation that has been proposed would address these major issues in several ways. The legislation would establish accountability and oversight mechanisms, provide more training and education to supervisors so they can better support employees with disabilities, and require comprehensive data to be collected so the program can be monitored. In addition to these improvements, by codifying the Connect 700 program into law, it would be easier for individuals to bring class-action lawsuits against agencies that fail to implement the program. This would put in place an important enforcement mechanism to ensure that there are appropriate consequences for agencies that ignore various components of the program.

Considering this information, the state legislature must pass SF 1261. Passing this legislation would strengthen the Connect 700 program and would ensure that the state of Minnesota can truly be a

leader in employing people with disabilities. Ultimately, this will close employment gaps, will provide access to meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and will ensure that people with disabilities have a seat at the table to be a part of the decision-making process. The existing research, while limited, does indicate that in other contexts both affirmative action programs like Schedule A and workplace disability training has had positive impacts on hiring people with disabilities. Therefore, legislation that has better oversight and provides comprehensive training would make the state government in Minnesota more inclusive, equitable, and effective at serving its constituents.

In terms of political feasibility, according to my research, it appears that the likelihood of the legislation passing is as high as it has ever been. This is because of the tireless efforts of lawmakers and advocates who raised the issue and the favorable political climate in the current legislative session.

### ***Limitations***

My inquiry had some important limitations. As mentioned earlier, the Wilder and Task Force reports had very small sample sizes limiting the representativeness of the sample. This will likely impact the strength of my conclusions about supervisor understanding of the program and the experiences of individuals with disabilities in state government. Second, MMB did not disaggregate their data, making it unclear what portion of the total employees with disabilities got their positions through Connect 700 and the portion of employees who aged into disability. This is important information because it would tell researchers how much of an impact Connect 700 is having on increasing the percentage of people with disabilities in state government and whether people aging into disability is skewing the results making it appear that representation goals (10% target in Walz executive order) are being met. Third, it was difficult to find sufficient examples of states with similar programs that had success. It is important for researchers to be able to link the state as model employer policies to specific outcomes like improved hiring and retention. Finally, there is limited research on the impacts of disability training on supervisor attitudes in the workplace. Knowing the impacts of training would provide a model to improve programs like the Connect 700 program. Researchers in the future must address these limitations in existing data and research to allow policymakers to make more definitive claims about the effectiveness of the state as model employer policies.

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