

**Bob Dole**



**NEWS**

**U.S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS**

**FROM:**

**SENATE REPUBLICAN LEADER**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1993

CONTACT: CLARKSON HINE  
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**DOLE CALLS FOR NATIONAL COMMISSION  
TO FIX NATION'S VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM**

WASHINGTON - Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole issued the following statement today calling for a national commission to restructure the nation's vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. Administered by the Department of Education, VR is the linchpin of the federal government's efforts to help people with disabilities find or hold a job. The General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report on the VR program August 27, 1993, criticizing the VR program. Senator Dole recently wrote President Clinton and Secretary of Education Richard Riley stressing the need for a commission.

"The GAO report is a unique and important study, and deserves our close attention. For the first time since the Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973, we have some solid data on VR's value to the disabled.

"Unfortunately, the news isn't very good. Put simply, only one-third of people who successfully graduate from VR work regularly, and even then often only for small wages. I suppose even a little help is better than none. But many people with disabilities don't get that. GAO also found that only 1-in-20 eligible individuals receive any services.

"When we passed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 we were determined to open a new window of employment opportunity for millions with disabilities. But we also knew that for many that window would remain closed because they lacked job skills and education. That's where VR comes in -- or should come in -- by providing the disabled with help to become gainfully employed, and thus join the economic mainstream and achieve some kind of financial security and independence.

"What then is the problem, and what's the remedy? The acting head of VR, quoted in the Washington Post on August 31st, seemed to imply the fault lies with the disabled. I hope I'm wrong about that, and will give the gentleman the benefit of the doubt.

"I believe the real problem is that the workplace and the labor market have changed dramatically since VR was first authorized in 1920. But VR has not kept up with the times.

"For this reason, I endorse GAO's recommendation that the National Commission on Rehabilitation Services be established. Authorized by last year's Rehab Act amendments, the Commission is charged with coming up with good ideas to improve VR and other Rehab Act programs. But in the 11 months since the amendments were passed, the Department of Education, which is to set up the Commission, has not acted. I have written Secretary Riley on this matter and hope he acts quickly.

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"I have three suggestions for the Commission. First, it should interpret its charge broadly, and look beyond the Rehab Act to all the nation's disability programs, including social security. The Commission should ask provocative questions: are VR customers satisfied? Since most people are working when they become disabled, how can we prevent job loss? Why is VR in the Department of Education, not in labor with other employment and training programs? Indeed, do we even need VR, or should people with disabilities be integrated into these other programs? Or perhaps VR services should be paid for by health insurance like other rehab services. This might give the greatest choice to people with disabilities.

"Second, the Commission must translate our good intentions into goals. Consider this goal -- by the year 2000, the level of joblessness among the disabled will be reduced to that of the non-disabled. We may need a goal like this to get any action.

"Third, the Commission must look to the future, something VR has not done well. As one expert has noted, "We [in disability services] continue to plan for yesterday to overcome the deficits of a decade ago." What kind of disability programs do we need for the 21st century? How can these programs become wellsprings of innovation?

"Some may believe the commission is not needed because we fixed VR's problems with the Rehab Act amendments. I don't agree. We tinkered with VR, but did not tackle its core problems. Indeed, 20 years ago, in 1973, GAO released a report on VR that found virtually the same problems. People with disabilities cannot wait 20 more years for a program that works.

"Let me add that I do not want my remarks misunderstood as critical of the nation's VR professionals. They are smart, committed, and hardworking. Indeed, I believe many of them are even more frustrated than I am. We must make VR work for them as well.

"I would also like to commend my colleague in the house, Congressman Mayor Owens (D-NY), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Select Education and Civil Rights, for requesting the GAO study. We need more studies like this to ensure that all our disability programs really make a difference.

"The poet Archibald Macleish once wrote, 'America was always promises.' But America's biggest promise -- a job -- is too often an empty promise to the disabled. Only one-third are working, 30 percent are in poverty -- nearly 3 times the general population. The lesson here is simple: for people with disabilities, as for most americans, working is essential to a decent income. We must do better, anything less is unacceptable."

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