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## Words matter: It's time to stop using 'rehabilitation'



**Your Turn**  
Paul Aronsohn  
Guest columnist

With October being National Disability Employment Awareness Month, now is a good time to start a national conversation regarding the concept of "rehabilitation" in the context of disability employment services.

Rehabilitation has long played a central role in the disability rights movement — one that stretches back more than a century and was originally focused on American veterans returning from war in Europe. Indeed, it was in 1918 that Congress adopted the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act, which provided federal assistance to help ensure honorably discharged veterans could be employed in civilian jobs. This was soon followed by the 1920 Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act, which extended employment-related support to non-veterans with disabilities.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was another critical milestone in the disability rights journey. The law sought to build on the work done over the preceding half-century by prohibiting discrim-

ination against people with disabilities in federal jobs or in organizations that receive federal funding. It also created the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration, currently housed in the U.S. Department of Education, which has been responsible for providing "resources to assist state and other agencies in providing vocational rehabilitation and other services to individuals with disabilities."

And all throughout this disability employment rights journey — from 1918 to 1973 to the present — rehabilitation programs and offices have been established in Washington, D.C., and across the country to facilitate employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Taken together, it has been a good, largely constructive history. Many people with disabilities have been well served by it all. However, it is now time to take this important, century-long effort to the next level by actually phasing out the concept of rehabilitation as an approach to disability employment practices — changing the nomenclature to better align with a more enlightened view of people with disabilities.

The reason is simple: Rehabilitation wrongly suggests that people with disabilities need to be fixed — that they are broken and need to be repaired. And

simply stated, that just isn't true.

Disabilities vary, and people with disabilities — like all people everywhere — are diverse and unique with respect to their strengths and their challenges. Some have limitations. Some require workplace accommodations. But to suggest that they are broken is just plain wrong and just plain hurtful.

Granted, the concept of rehabilitation remains important and useful in other contexts. Without question, from time to time, we all need to be fixed or repaired or healed in some way. Sometimes, such as after a stay in an acute care hospital, we need to spend time in a rehabilitation facility to get back to baseline — back to where we were before the incident that led us to the hospital in the first place. However, that is a whole lot different from suggesting that an entire group of people needs to be fixed in order to be employed, because they have autism or cerebral palsy or Down syndrome or spina bifida or any number of other disabilities.

As such, we should end the use of the concept of rehabilitation in the world of disability employment services and programs. Like the other "R" word that outlived its usefulness and became increasingly offensive with respect to people with intellectual disabilities, "re-

habilitation" should no longer be used, because it can create and perpetuate a mistaken mindset and misguided set of expectations with respect to people with disabilities.

To this end, we should follow the lead of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which took important steps to eliminate the use of the concept in its services and programs soon after President Joe Biden took office. In fact, in 2022, the VA removed the word "rehabilitation" from its employment-related division, replacing it with the more fitting "readiness."

In similar fashion, while honoring its important history, we should move beyond rehabilitation as a leading concept in disability employment matters and embrace a more positive, more empowering, and more appropriate concept that embodies a most important truth: that while some people have special needs, each of us deserves the opportunity to realize our full potential.

After all, words matter.

*Paul Aronsohn, who comes from a family with disabilities, is New Jersey's Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families and is also a member of the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities.*