INTRODUCTION

No matter what disabilities we have, whether these are visible or non-visible, the reality is that each federal employee with a disability (along with our allies) serves as a trailblazer of sorts. Considering how the overall employment rate among our community as of June 2021 hovers at around 35.4%, the vast majority of job seekers with disabilities has continued to find gainful employment to be ever-elusive. For those who are able to join the Federal Government as each of us has done, challenges may still remain.

Whether these surround securing reasonable accommodations or efforts otherwise to gain equal access to every facet of workplace life, individual employees may be left feeling alone or isolated if not experiencing support. In the worst of cases, employees may choose to leave the federal workplace altogether, thereby depriving the general public an opportunity over the longer run to benefit from the talents and abilities that was the rationale for their being hired in the first place.

In fact, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), as of 2020, statistics show that about 60% of federal employees hired in recent years left their jobs within two years. We within the Federal Exchange on Employment and Disability (FEED) have the ongoing opportunity to stop and even reverse this trend.

This is where either employee resource groups or affinity groups come in. They are organized in different ways within each federal agency where they exist, and their degrees of influence and responsibility also vary.

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STEPS FOR BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING DISABILITY RESOURCE GROUPS

As FEED supports efforts by Federal Government employees to organize Disability Resource Groups (DRGs) and affinity groups, to strengthen them once they come into being and to create long-term sustainability and growth as time progresses, the steps below may help expand networks within government agencies while building important connections with colleagues with disabilities who are undertaking similar work across the Executive Branch.

**STEP 1: In the Spirit of Self-Determination, Begin Gathering the Names of Colleagues with Self-Identified Disabilities.**

For DRG organizers, identifying fellow employees with disabilities for recruitment purposes may feel daunting at first, especially when information about potential recruits is relatively limited or even non-existent. However, one proven way is to reach out to leverage the contacts of colleagues who serve either in Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) roles and/or those already tasked with facilitating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA).

Even more powerful is securing commitments from senior agency political leadership to issue communication geared toward supporting DRG formation and expansion.

Utilizing materials developed by the DRG at the U.S. Department of Education, organizers may utilize templates for specific use by agency component leaders (see attachment 1 on page 5) and DEIA allies (see attachment 2 on page 6). Those letters may be accompanied by a short Questions and Answers document that describes the role and function of the DRG and features a call to action to get involved (see attachment 3 on page 7).

As names are gathered, a database should be created, most effectively in Microsoft Access, to keep track of names, components to which individuals belong, contact information, and desired areas to take personal action. This will be important as DRG operations begin to grow and as specific functions become incorporated into its organizational activity.

**STEP 2: Network with Other Affinity Groups and DRGs, Contributing Efforts to Building OPM’s Existing Employee Resource Group Community of Practice.**

Whether organizers are part of a long-established DRG or are just getting started at putting one together, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), presently under the direction of Teri Williams, Diversity Program Specialist within the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility, has established an Employee Resource Group Community of Practice. That forum enables federal employees with a MAX.gov account to network with one another and to exchange information and ideas about best practices.

Those with existing agency DRGs should check the most [current list](#) to make sure that entries are complete and up-to-date. For DRGs whose information is missing entirely, they may submit their information for inclusion.
**STEP 3: Draft a Charter that Establishes the Structure and Purpose of the Group.**

Different DRGs vary in structure from informal to formal and some have no govern charter while others do. DRG organizers may view a charter sample from Vibrant Pittsburgh as an example.

It should be noted, though, that having a charter in and of itself is but a means to the greater goal of bringing employees with different types of disabilities together to serve as a collective voice in collaborating with agency decision-makers. The greater the efforts to build close working partnerships with senior political and career leadership, the higher the likelihood that the DRG will place itself in a position to provide constructive feedback regarding ways in which the agency may most optimally include employees with disabilities in every aspect of current and pending programs and operations.

As an ultimate result, a DRG may gain greater influence, which can impact policies, programs, practices, and procedures that reflect concerned, priorities, perspectives, and insight surrounding disability-related issues at the workplace.

**STEP 4: Call for a Meeting to Organize the Group, and Seek Official Recognition from Appropriate Agency Leaders as an Affinity Group or DRG.**

Depending on the agency to which organizers belong, recognition may be formal or informal. Either way, worktime is typically authorized by employees’ supervisors as long as such authorization does not detract from their fulfillment of core and priority job responsibilities. DRG recognition may also allow work computers, phones, conference rooms, and other office assets to be used during the course of DRG work.

If the DRG is set up with a leadership structure of some kind, the team as a whole should decide whom is to serve in what capacity, for how long, and in advancement of what responsibilities. This will help ensure greater organizational accountability as the DRG moves forward with tackling key issues of concern.

Key responsibilities may include running or facilitating meetings, crafting outgoing notices and messages to announce upcoming meetings, organizing agendas, taking minutes, tracking completion of identified tasks by specific deadlines, expanding membership, building inter-DRG alliances, attending cross-agency meetings such as those organized by FEED or OPM, and ensuring that each new member feels welcomed and integrally included.

If reasonable accommodations are needed as the DRG carries forward with its work, it is possible for the DRG to request related support from the EEO office or if there is a reasonable Accommodation Program Manager/Disability Program Manager who may assist.

**STEP 5: Conduct a Brainstorming session to Decide Goals, Assign Task Leaders, Establish Accomplishment Timelines, and Align Work EEO Priorities as Set Forth in the Agencies Strategic Plan.**

In order to establish and quicken momentum for success, clarity is critical. This is why the DRG as a whole must necessarily take the time to decide what issues are most important, who is to handle those issues, what strengths each member is to bring to the table, and what precise commitments members are willing to make to contribute their own time, talents, and abilities to bringing goals to fruition.
Some goals may be lofty, while others may represent “lower-hanging fruit.” In both instances, as long as roles within the group are defined with precision and provided that the DRG from the outset strives to embody a culture of teamwork and cooperation, success may be assured.

**STEP 6: Reconvene Regularly to Facilitate Progress and Set New Goals as Warranted.**

Especially when a DRG is new, attendance may potentially be very high. However, to the extent that follow-thru ends up being lacking even in spite of the best of intentions, the DRG could run the risk of becoming weakened and, in the worst of scenarios, ceasing to exist altogether.

To prevent this from happening, when each meeting consciously incorporates commitments having been made and kept and next action steps being set and implemented, influence will continue to grow as group accomplishments keep mounting. Central areas of focus around which goal-setting and fulfillment occur may include but not be limited to the following categories:

- Internal and external communications.
- Agency policy development and advocacy.
- Graphic and artistic designing of flyers (making sure, of course, that alt tags are included to ensure accessibility).
- Event planning.
- Mentoring, training, and professional development.

**STEP 7: As Documents and Other Materials are Developed, Centralize those with OPM so as to Facilitate Ongoing Exchange of Information and Ideas while Building and Strengthening Cross-Agency Partnerships.**

Here, from a philosophical standpoint, it is essential that federal employees from across government consciously make the decision not to reinvent the proverbial wheel. Duplication of effort merely causes limitation of resources to be wasted and silos to be unnecessarily erected. This is why, the more we all work together, the better positioned we will be to build upon the pioneering work of others, facilitate synergy through the ongoing exchange of information and ideas, instill a collective culture in which employees from all partner agencies are able both to inform and inspire one another, and create a dynamic and energetic atmosphere that strengthens our shared sense of community.

Towards these ends, since OPM has already developed the infrastructure for DRGs to come together and to evolve as time progresses and as needs change, its ERG Community of Practice will evolve further to become whatever we make of it. Particularly at this point in history, now is the opportunity to unite with greater rigor, enthusiasm, determination, and sense of purpose than ever before!

Just as the broader disability rights movement continues to strengthen and grow because of the incredible power of collective action, that same potential lies right here with each of us. Whatever our disability may be and no matter where we find ourselves on an agency organizational chart, we are each brought together by a spirit of collaboration and an eagerness to make our difference count. As this occurs consistently, just imagine the magnificent possibilities that lie ahead!

**STEP 8: Create and Expand a Pipeline of Colleagues with Disabilities Allying Themselves with Your Group, FEED, and the OPM Community of Practice to Optimize an Ever-Broadening Sense of Community and Support Across Government.**
Each federal employee with a disability has their network of support. Members of that support system may consist of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people (depending on the extent of one’s personal mailing list, social media accounts, etc.). Among each of those network members are personal life stories that are waiting to be told.

The more we each remain on the look-out for others to join in the efforts described here, the better positioned we will be to increase our numbers, broaden our reach, deepen our relationships, and expand our capacity. As such, recognizing FEED’s work within the disability employment space, OPM’s efforts to unite the federal disability community, and the senior interagency disability meetings that are designed to optimize coordination and information exchange on a variety of issues facing federal employees with disabilities, these entities may serve as virtual places for us to gather, support one another’s accomplishments, and rally others to do the same.

CONCLUSION

Our future looks bright indeed. May we each rededicate ourselves to advancing actions to bring everyone together. With such unity, no lofty goal is out of reach.


2. Sample Template for Outreach to Allies Promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA).

3. DRG Q&A Document from the U.S. Department of Education.
ATTACHMENT 1

SAMPLE TEMPLATE REQUEST LETTER FOR DRG ORGANIZERS TO AGENCY COMPONENT LEADERS

Dear Departmental Diversity and Inclusion Council Colleagues:

As we gear up early both for the ___ Anniversary of the signing of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act and for October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), which embraces the rich talents and abilities that persons with disabilities contribute to this nation’s workforce, we ask that you leverage the below template to reach out to your respective POCs. To the extent that you are each able to facilitate such communications being issued by your respective principals, all the better. When doing so, please send a CC to me so that we may keep track of these noteworthy actions across the Department. We look forward to including information about such efforts in future written report submissions to this Council. Better still, we are eager to collaborate with you to facilitate concrete and quantifiable results of which we may all be rightfully proud.

Thank you so much for all that you do. It remains such a distinct pleasure to serve alongside you!

Sincerely,

[Name and signature]

Note that “POC” stands for Principal Operating Components, the description of sub-agencies within the U.S. Department of Education
Dear Colleagues:

As part of our POC’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, we wish to share further information about the Disability Resource Group (DRG). Its goal is to support effective recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement of qualified people with all types of disabilities. I encourage everyone, including those with and without disabilities, to become fully aware of the scope of its work and actively to lend your insights and perspectives so as to help contribute to its optimal effectiveness. Highlights below include:

- Membership and dynamics.
- Policy focus.
- Information Resource Development.
- Awareness event preparations and support.

Like each of you, I fervently believe that persons with disabilities are an invaluable part of our workplace. As is true for each employee, they are a vital part of our team and contribute to every facet of our office’s work. As is the case with each of you, I, for one, am truly grateful for the roles that they individually and collectively play.

And, as a reminder, persons with disabilities seeking reasonable accommodations may contact __ at [Phone Number] or by emailing [him/her/they] at [Email Address].

I remain committed to supporting colleagues with disabilities, who are just as important a part of this POC as everyone else. Warmest wishes, and here’s to an even brighter future!

[Name and signature block of principal]
ATTACHMENT 3

DRG Q&A DOCUMENT FROM THE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

What is the Disability Resource Group (DRG)?

The Disability Resource Group (DRG) is an organization of ED employees, dedicated to supporting the needs of persons with disabilities throughout the Department. By developing policy and program recommendations and ongoing expansion of information resources of particular interest and benefit to employees with physical, psychiatric, intellectual, and learning disabilities, the DRG aims to be the “one-stop shop” for information while providing a forum for colleagues from across the Department to exchange information and ideas geared toward making ED an even more ideal place to work.

What are the Four-Fold Goals of the DRG?

- **Facilitating Policy Development:** The DRG as officially recognized by ED’s Office of Equal Employment Opportunity Services (OEEOS) serves as an incubator of specific ideas for developing into concrete policies, programs, practices, and procedures whose adoption will lead to even more effective participation by ED employees with disabilities in every facet of workplace life. Key issues include but are not limited to innovative recruitment practices, facilitation of reasonable accommodations, assistance with compliance with Section 508, and fostering an inclusive workplace climate. Toward this end, DRG also seeks to identify intersectionality issues in support of departmental affinity groups wishing to gain a disability perspective concerning their respective employee constituencies.

- **Expanding the Training Resources Repository:** To prevent from having to reinvent the proverbial wheel, DRG continually develops and expands its list of training sessions and stand-alone documents that address various aspects of workplace life as intersecting with the disability experience. Far beyond mere awareness in the general sense, these trainings are intended to help employees at a practical level. Centralized through **DRG’s SharePoint site**, these resources may be of optimal support both to persons with disabilities and those who support them.

- **Supporting Disability Awareness Events:** Though primary responsibility for disability awareness events rests with the Disability Program Manager, who puts on special emphasis events, DRG makes event recommendations and proactively seeks to carry out such activities. Philosophically, DRG seeks to expand the audience at such events by going far beyond mere inspirational and motivational speakers but instead by identifying creative ways to highlight effective practices within the Department to promote further replication, spotlight ED personnel at all levels whose work is resulting in creating more of an inclusive environment, and building additional bridges between persons with self-identified disabilities and others.

- **Professional Mentoring, Training and Development:** Whatever disability an employee has, whether it is visible or non-visible, each member of the DRG is bound together by his/her/their fundamental belief in one another and in the boundless potential that each person possess.
Here, disability is not seen as a tragedy, nor is it believed that disability itself necessarily detracts from the quality of one’s life. With this philosophy in mind and in support of mentoring, training, professional development opportunities, the DRG seeks to share information about initiatives and programs that are designed to foster enhanced learning, whether in a structured or unstructured setting. DRG members also seek to share knowledge of career-building opportunities and other innovations that serve to strengthen professional networks while increasing chances to advance in one’s career even further.

How May I Get Involved?

Persons with and without disabilities from throughout the Department and no matter their position within the ED organizational chart are invited and encouraged to become involved in DRG’s work. Such individuals include but are not limited to Diversity Change Agents, __, )__, and __. Most ideally, DRG should consist of employees from each POC. To find out if your POC is already represented as part of the DRG and/or to join DRG ranks from your own POC, email [Name] at ___@ED.gov or call him/ her/they at [Phone number]

When reaching out to DRG to get involved, it is recommended that employees specifically enumerate in priority order the things to which they wish to dedicate their energy and state the estimated number of hours available each month toward advancing DRG’s efforts. This will empower DRG to optimize effectiveness and efficiency while making the greatest impact of individuals’ invaluable time in light of a number of competing demands.

Here are DRG’s present opportunities to get involved immediately:

- **Membership Growth:** Believing in that old proverbial adage, “Many hands make for light work,” DRG continually endeavors to identify employees who are willing and eager to join its ranks. Toward this end, DRG is searching for people who may play the lead in tallying which POCs are already represented, cultivating relationships with POC leaders who have not yet designated a representative, assisting individuals with securing support from their POCs to receive approval to serve on the DRG, and proactively seeking membership addition from among those possessing specific strengths that are still needed at this time.

- **Policy Development:** DRG is searching for employees with a knack for identifying existing ED policies for review, analyzing existing policies and devising possibilities for possible updates, formulating recommendations and their related rationales, facilitating their adoption by appropriate ED entities, and overseeing ultimate implementation while documenting practical results that illustrate the value of such changes.

- **Training Resources Repository:** Here, DRG is in search of individuals willing to identify, vet, organize, and upload information about existing training opportunities and stand-alone resource documents that would be of assistance to persons with disabilities within the Department along with those who seek to support them. DRG’s platform is SharePoint, so those involved with this series of activities must either possess or be willing to learn skills relating to site administration to facilitate regular updates as needed.

- **Event Planning:** Though planning events falls outside the direct scope of DRG’s work, there nevertheless exists opportunities to help the Disability Program Manager to organize and put on
disability awareness events. DRG’s approach is to think outside the box by proposing events that further engage participants rather than merely utilizing the same previous formula of bringing in so-called “motivational” or “inspirational” speakers to address an audience that historically has consisted of people who are already supportive of employees with disabilities. The key strategy here would be to empower all participants to network with one another so that, at a practical level, they come away with real-world possibilities for expanding awareness about and networks of persons with disabilities in a manner that leads to greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in all parts of the Department. As such, DRG is searching for individuals who love creative event planning and whose detail-oriented nature will play a major role in supporting the Disability Program Manager who is to be the lead in organizing such events.

To reach out to DRG, send an email to ___@ED.gov or, if alternative means of communications are more preferable, feel free to contact the [Title], [Name], at [Number].