

Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act: Working for a Federal Contractor

What is the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

The **Rehabilitation Act of 1973** (Rehabilitation Act) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment, and in the employment practices of federal contractors.

What is Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act?

Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that federal contractors and subcontractors — companies doing business with the federal government — take affirmative action to recruit, hire, employ, promote, and retain qualified people with disabilities.

Some highlights of Section 503 include:

- Federal contractors must strive to ensure that at least 7% of their job groups or workforce, depending on the size of the employer, are employees with disabilities.
- Federal contractors must invite job applicants and new and current employees to voluntarily self-identify as having a disability.

Federal contractors and subcontractors must have a written plan outlining specific steps they will take to recruit, hire, train, promote and retain people with disabilities. To help them track progress toward the

7% goal, federal contractors must report the number of people with disabilities who apply for jobs versus the number of people with disabilities who are hired.

What is affirmative action?

Affirmative action is an action or policy favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in relation to employment or education.

What does self-identification mean?

Self-identification means that you will be asked to voluntarily identify as an individual with a disability to your employer or potential employer. Federal contractors provide a special **self-identification form** to applicants and employees. The form asks if you have or have ever had a disability. You will have the opportunity to self-identify before or after a job offer is made. Watch **this video** or read the captions to learn more about self-identification.

Why am I being asked to complete this form?

Applicants and employees are asked to complete the form to help measure how well federal contractors are doing. **Completing this form is voluntary.**

Whether you are applying for a job or already work for a federal contractor, your answer will be kept private and will not be used against you in any way.

Do I have to tell my employer or prospective employer that I have a disability?

No. Self-identification is completely voluntary. However, you must self-identify as a person with a disability if you are requesting job accommodations. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Can I wait until after I accept a job or already work for a federal contractor or subcontractor to tell my employer about my disability?

Yes. Federal contractors and subcontractors must invite all employees to self-identify as having a disability every 5 years. Your employer will also regularly remind you that you can confidentially update your disability status at any time. You may voluntarily self-identify as having a disability on this form without fear of any punishment because you did not identify as having a disability earlier.

What else should I know about Section 503 and voluntarily disclosing that I have a disability?

A federal contractor or subcontractor can ask applicants and employees to voluntarily self-identify as having a disability, but may not ask you what that disability is.

An employer cannot require applicants or employees to self-identify as having a disability or ask for proof.

An employer must keep self-identification of the disability confidential and maintain it separately from other personnel records.

How can I find job opportunities with federal contractors and subcontractors?

Organizations that provide employment-related services, like State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies and American Job Centers (AJCs) are great resources to find federal contractors and subcontractors.

If you are age 18 through 64 and receive Social

Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a Ticket to Work (Ticket) program Employment Network (EN) may also help.

Many federal contractors and subcontractors seek help from State VR agencies, AJCs and ENs to find qualified candidates with disabilities to fill open positions.

Search and learn more about these service providers using Choose Work's **Find Help** tool.

What does Section 503 mean to Social Security disability beneficiaries?

Section 503 provides job opportunities for qualified people who receive Social Security disability benefits. The Ticket program can help connect you with jobs, many of which are with businesses that do work for the government.

Where can I learn more about Section 503?

For more information on Section 503, visit the U.S. Department of Labor's **Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs website**. You can also watch the Choose Work webinar, **Ticket to Work: Working with a Federal Contractor**.





Angel Experience with Section 503

When Angel received a medical retirement from the U.S. military, he started receiving Social Security disability benefits

that allowed him to focus on recovering his health. When he was ready to work, Angel worried that having a disability would make it difficult for him to find work. Then he learned about Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act and discovered that federal contractors were looking for qualified job seekers with disabilities just like him. Connecting with a Ticket program Employment Network helped him find the answers to questions he had as well as supports and services he needed to smoothly transition working for a federal contractor servicing the U.S. Department of Defense. Learn more in Angel's Ticket to Work success story, **Wingman**.

For more information

To learn more about the Ticket program, visit choosework.ssa.gov.

You can also call the **Ticket to Work Help Line** at **1-866-968-7842** or **1-866-833-2967** (TTY) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. ET.

Ask a representative to send you a list of service providers or find providers on your own with the Ticket program **Find Help** tool.



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choosework.ssa.gov/contact



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To view online and access the resources linked in this fact sheet, please visit: <https://choosework.ssa.gov/library/faq-section-503-of-the-rehabilitation-act>

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