



**The Employment of  
PERFORMERS WITH DISABILITIES  
in the Entertainment Industry**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**T**here are approximately 54 million Americans with disabilities, and yet they remain virtually invisible in the media. Until now, information about the employment of people with disabilities in film and television in the United States was virtually unknown. Annually, Screen Actors Guild (SAG) publishes a Casting Data Report that provides the industry with an analysis of the hiring practices and employment trends in film and television related to ethnicity, age and gender. The industry does not currently report information about the hiring of SAG actors with disabilities; hence, little is known about their employment. In response to this need, SAG commissioned this report, "The Employment of Performers with Disabilities in the Entertainment Industry," to create a comprehensive profile of the employment of SAG members with disabilities in 2003. In addition, SAG members with disabilities described their experiences and views about getting an audition, disclosing their disability and need for accommodation to an employer, treatment in the workplace, and perceived barriers to employment. The collection, analysis and dissemination of this information are essential to achieving the objectives of non-discrimination and fair employment in the industry.

To address the aims of this study, the National Arts and Disability Center at UCLA held 4 focus groups in New York and Los Angeles and sent a mail survey to 1,237 SAG members who had self-identified on SAG's Diversity, Special Skills and Talent Survey as having a disability or using adaptive equipment. Thirty members with disabilities participated in the focus groups and 496 (40.1%) responded to the survey.

### **K** **EY FINDINGS:**

- Only one-third of SAG members with disabilities reported working in a theatrical or television production in 2003.
- Performers with disabilities worked an average of 4.1 days a year. Males worked an average of 5 days, compared to 2 days work for females. Performers with disabilities under 40 years of age had a higher average number of days worked than those over 40, 6.2 days versus 3.5 days.



- SAG members with disabilities have extensive training and education, with 28% having a college degree in theater and 50% involved in a variety of professional experiences through other entertainment industry unions.
- Despite measures such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Producers/Screen Actors Guild's Policy of Non-Discrimination and Diversity (2001), 36% of the performers with disabilities felt they had encountered some form of discrimination in the workplace, including not being cast or being refused an audition because of their disability.
- While a little over a third of the performers with disabilities stated that a reasonable accommodation would help them in their work, 60% never asked for an accommodation because they believed employers would be reluctant to hire them. Many of the performers were unwilling to be candid about their disability in fear of being viewed as an object of pity and incapable of doing the job.
- Overall, the respondents believed that their prospects for employment were very limited and identified the three greatest barriers as: (1) only being considered for disability-specific roles; (2) a lack of acting jobs in general; and (3) difficulty getting an audition.
- Not surprisingly, the performers with disabilities that had more frequent auditions were also more likely to have worked. The most frequently encountered obstacles to getting an audition were stereotypical attitudes about disability and only being considered for limited roles. Also, the performers reported that the more 'obvious' or 'visible' the disability, the less likely the actor was to be hired or taken seriously by the creative team.
- Commercial work (51%) accounted for the largest share of auditions in SAG productions, followed by television (25%) and film work (18%).
- Performers with disabilities secured the majority of their acting jobs in television (32%), followed by film (28%) and commercials (22%).



- 103 performers with disabilities (20%) were cast in 426 lead roles and 357 supporting roles. 16 performers with disabilities had a total of 316 voice-over roles.
- 101 background actors with disabilities worked an average of 6.57 days. Most (56%) earned between \$1- \$1,000 a year.
- Nearly 30% of the study respondents acquired their disability after the age of 40. Some of the performers reported experiencing two forms of employment discrimination, for 'being old' and because they are 'disabled.'

## **R**ECOMMENDATIONS

The report concludes with recommendations to guide policies and practices in the industry.

- Advocate for greater diversity in roles and increased hiring of performers with disabilities in film and television. Performers with disabilities want to see changes in audition and employment practices so that the results reflect the industry's commitment to eliminate stereotyping in casting and to portray the American Scene realistically.
- Collect ongoing data about the employment of performers with disabilities in the same manner as other underrepresented groups to allow accurate comparisons of employment practices and trends in the industry. Reliable methods for the identification of the performers with disabilities will be necessary as not all disabilities can readily be identified through observation.
- Advocate for the inclusion of performers with disabilities in all diversity employment initiatives. Address images, language and attitudes that contribute or hinder inclusion in the workplace.
- Educate the industry about the accessibility and accommodation rights and needs of performers with disabilities and how to address them. While most buildings now provide accessible parking and bathroom access, there are



still a number of limitations to gaining access to audition sites. Performers do not believe that auditioning in alternate sites, such as parking lots or outside of the casting room, allows them the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in an equitable fashion to others interviewed during casting sessions.

- Provide resources to the industry regarding accommodations, such as how to get a sign language interpreter, companies that rent out accessible equipment such as ramps or trailers, and so on. The majority of accommodations needed by the actors were fairly minor, such as a place and opportunity to sit down or proximity to a bathroom. Other accommodations, such as a sign language interpreter, or Braille or large print script require planning and associated costs.
- Examine the needs of older actors, specifically those with age-related disabilities, as more than half of the entire membership of SAG is over the age 40. Performers with disabilities who stay in the workforce past the age of 65 are increasingly likely to acquire disabilities.