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Emerging Disabilities More Understood But Still Far From Being Identified

LAWRENCE, KS — Persons with emerging disabilities as compared to more well known disabilities tend to have less education, have greater difficulties with activities of daily living, be insured more frequently with Medicaid (indicating lower income), have less private insurance, see doctors for medical care more frequently, and be much less likely to be working, say University of Kansas researchers in a study reported in both the June *Disability and Society* and March *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

“Emerging disabilities cannot accurately be defined: they are impossible to accurately measure at the present time,” said Mike Fox, training director at The Research and Training Center on Full Participation in Independent Living, a division of the Research and Training Center on Independent Living (RTC/IL) at the University of Kansas.



Funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, this study used information from focus groups, interviews, and surveys to identify this population comprised of people with multiple chemical sensitivities, diabetes, asthma, fibromyalgia, and other disabling conditions. Study participants reported difficulty in accurate diagnoses, a perception of being invisible in society, and pain as part of its disability. Representative groups indicated that they viewed their condition as short-term. Their search for a “cure” then obscured disability acceptance and focus on ways to live less dependently.

The study also revealed that Centers for Independent Living can expand their role into one that recognizes, accepts, and supports emerging disability groups. Part of this expansion would include increased outreach, disability awareness, health referral, employment assistance, and improved home help for people with less recognized disabilities.

A related part of the study that investigated legal opinions and summaries of Circuit Court cases testing the limits of the Americans With Disabilities Act, indicated that injuries are dominant test cases, followed by problems arising from thought processing and behavior.

“A disability is defined by its relationship to the nature of a person’s work; thus, people with similar conditions are covered by the ADA differently based upon what both the ‘reasonable accommodation’ is, and the nature of the “life activity” affected,” Fox said. “Emerging disabilities may not be best measures because of unique nature of each case.”

The RTC/IL furthers independent living for people with disabilities by collaborating with target populations on productive research and innovative knowledge distribution.

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