

When Everyone Works, Everyone Wins: Employment of People with Disabilities

Iowans with disabilities want to work, to earn money, to be with people during the day, and to develop and practice skills. For many years they and their families have depended upon sheltered workshops and pre-vocational services to answer these needs. Sheltered workshop providers have offered a supportive, caring environment for thousands of Iowans. In recent years, this service model has come under stress for many reasons. At the same time, a statewide public/private partnership, "Employment First," is working on a new approach to employment of people with disabilities proven to work both in Iowa and other states. It does not involve closing workshops, but many people are asking where the service system is headed.

Employment First (E1st) in Iowa

The mission of E1st is to change beliefs, practices, systems and funding so that employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age Iowans with disabilities, regardless of level of disability.

The intention of E1st is to create more employment options, not to close workshops!

Is This Realistic? Can This Really Work?

YES! In 2012 The Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP) and the Iowa Coalition for Integrated Employment (ICIE) funded six community providers to support individuals with disabilities in finding community based jobs using customized employment techniques. Out of 30 job seekers, 15 were employed within a year. Since then more providers have sought out support and technical assistance to increase their employment services.

- **As of September 2014, fourteen committed providers helped 427 Iowans with disabilities secure community based employment.**
- **The average wage was \$7.81 an hour, with the hours worked averaging 17 per week.**
- **Many of these individuals had once been thought to be "too disabled to work."**

Additional Factors Accounting for the Growing Support of E1st Goals

- The low participation rate of people with disabilities in the workforce keeps people dependent on public assistance, and is not a best practice.
- Individuals with disabilities, families, providers and policy-makers demand a new approach.
- The Department of Justice has taken up segregated work settings as a violation of the [Supreme Court's Olmstead](#) decision requiring that services for people with disabilities be provided in the most integrated setting consistent with their needs. States have been required to offer more options for integrated employment.
- The Iowa Legislature mandated that mental health and disability services redesign be based on *Olmstead* principles; thus, supported employment is one of the required core services.

This document has been endorsed by:

The Olmstead Consumer Taskforce; The Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council; The Iowa Chapter of the Association for People Supporting Employment First (APSE); The Iowa Coalition for Integrated Employment (ICIE)

Getting People Community Based Jobs: What More Needs to Be Done?

- **Raising expectations:** Young people, their parents, and school staff need to prepare for their transition to adulthood with the expectation of meaningful work in the community. Transition services should include career exploration, work experience, and benefits planning.
- **Supporting changes in approach by employment service providers:** Currently, most of Iowa's expenditures (nearly 80%) on employment services are spent on facility-based settings which seldom result in jobs in the community. In order to provide more individualized services that lead to community based employment, providers need technical assistance, access to training for staff, and reimbursement for services at a level that is financially sustainable.
- **Building collaborative partnerships:** Many state agencies play vital roles in increasing employment options for people with disabilities. With a shared vision, they need to align their policies and coordinate resources to achieve desired outcomes. Advocates and family members need to raise expectations for those outcomes. More community rehabilitation providers, guided by clear expectations and adequate financial support, need to join their colleagues on the frontlines of change.

Getting People Community Based Jobs: Who is Supporting the Work?

- **Employment 1st (E1st)** is both an idea and the name of an advocacy effort that began in 2009, involving community rehabilitation providers, individuals with disabilities and families, the Iowa Chapter of the Association for People Supporting Employment First (Iowa APSE), and many state agencies.
- **Iowa DHS (Iowa Medicaid Enterprise and Mental Health and Disability Services)** supports Iowa's membership in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN), a source of technical assistance to states that helped Iowa organize for change in favor of integrated employment options.
- **ICIE**, funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, is a systems change project focused on improving Iowa systems so that Iowans with disabilities have fully integrated, competitive work, regardless of where they live in the state. Efforts utilize a Coalition of diverse stakeholders who inform and shape work across the state to align policies, funding, and best practice to support integrated employment opportunities.
- **Iowa APSE** actively promotes integrated employment by providing leadership, training, technical assistance, and advocating for change with legislators and parents.
- **EFSLMP**, funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy and directed by Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), provides Iowa state agencies and community providers access to the technical assistance of "subject matter experts" who can advise Iowa on its efforts to redesign its service system in favor of more competitive, integrated employment.
- **Iowa Association of Community Providers (IACP)**, and numerous Community Rehabilitation Providers serving individuals with disabilities, are partners in these efforts working to transform and increase the community based focus of their services.
- **DHS and IVRS** are working to coordinate policies and funding for employment services and supports to increase options for integrated employment.
- **Iowa Workforce Development's Disability Employment Initiative** is focused on improving the ability of the state's Workforce Center system to serve and include people with disabilities in the workforce of the communities where they live.

Decision Makers: As you deliberate policy and funding, please consider whether your decision will help your constituents with a disability prepare for, and find, integrated employment in the community.

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