

Iowa's Employment First Initiative A Call for Change of Historical Proportion



Partners:

*IA Chapter of APSE: The Employment Network
The Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG)
Iowa's Developmental Disabilities Council
Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS)
Iowa's Disability Navigator Program (DPN)*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rationale for the Employment First Initiative in Iowa along with the steps taken leading up to the Summit.

Fall 2009

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Iowans with disabilities, as their peers without disabilities, possess the right and responsibility to work. Iowans with disabilities, as their peers without disabilities, should have the opportunity to live their life to the fullest and contribute toward their own self-sufficiency.

Believing that all Iowans with disabilities should have the opportunity for employment as do their peers without disabilities, representatives of Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP), Iowa Disability Navigator Program (DPN), the Governor's Developmental Disability Council, the Iowa Chapter of APSE: The Employment Network (IA-APSE), Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), and the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) began planning the Iowa Employment First Initiative. Part of this Initiative is the gathering of key stakeholders at the Employment First Summit to be held in October 2009.

The Summit October 22, 2009 Scheman Center, Ames 8:15-4:00

The goal of the Employment First Initiative is that competitive employment will be the first priority and the expected and preferred outcome of all Iowans with disabilities.

For the Iowa Employment First Initiative, competitive employment means:

- regular or customized employment where employees with disabilities are paid by the business (unless self-employed), at minimum or prevailing wage and benefits
- regular and ordinary opportunities for meaningful interactions with co-workers without disabilities, and/or customers and/or the general public.

To prepare for the Summit and gather grassroots input, 14 facilitated Focus Groups were held throughout the state during April, May, and June of 2009. Building on the IVRS Regional Employment Teams, news releases as well as invitations were sent to various stakeholders. Attendance ranged from 5 to 15. People attending represented people with disabilities, family members, Community Rehabilitation Providers, businesses, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), Iowa Workforce Development (IWD), educators, Iowa Disability Program Navigator program, and County personnel.

The overriding focus question for each group was:

How do we make competitive employment the 1st priority and the expected and preferred outcome of all Iowans with disabilities?

Each group went through the same process with the same facilitator:

- What do we want to see in place in two years as a result of our actions?
- What is blocking us from moving toward our vision?
- What innovative, substantial actions will deal with the underlying contradictions and move us toward our vision?

This brainstorming process generated over 4,000 ideas, including approximately 1,400 innovative actions to take to move toward the vision of Employment First. Themes and trends were identified, analyzed and then summarized using the same format. From the statewide information five strategic outcomes emerged:

- Policies and funding dollars are aligned with Employment First
- Individuals with disabilities and family members advocate for Employment First and participate in the design of employment services and supports
- Businesses influence businesses to create employment opportunities
- Strong partnerships remove barriers to employment outcomes
- Best practice models drive successful post high school outcomes for working, learning, and living.

These outcomes will be the focus of the Summit. Groups will develop a plan to achieve the particular outcome they are passionate about. Plans will include action steps, timelines and responsibilities.

Why an Employment First Initiative?

The dignity, responsibility and economic independence resulting from gainful employment is one of the most effective ways of enhancing self-reliance, changing attitudes, reducing dependency on public benefits and promoting community acceptance of people with disabilities.

(U.S.D.H.H.S. 2001. Report to the President: *“Delivering on the Promise: Preliminary Report of Federal Agencies’ Actions to Eliminate Barriers and Promote Integration”*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health of and Human Services.)

With the baby boom generation retiring and stricter laws regarding immigration, people with disabilities are the last untapped labor source in Iowa and the country. According to the 2003 U.S. Census American Community Survey, there are 19,871,681 Americans with disabilities between the ages of 21-64. Nationally this group has more than a 40% higher unemployment rate than individuals without disabilities. According to the 2004 Harris Survey, 35% of people with disabilities are working full or part time compared to 78% of the rest of the population. This same report notes that 63% of those who are not working would prefer to work

In Iowa we see similar statistics. According to the State Data Center of Iowa’s report, *Iowans with Disabilities: 2009*, there are over 397,000 people with some type of disability living in

Iowa (five and over). This does not include those in the military, or living in institutions such as prisons or the resource centers. The employment rate in 2007 for Iowans with a disability was 45.1%, compared to 81.6% for Iowans without a disability. That results in a 55% unemployment rate. Twenty percent of Iowans with disabilities live in poverty, compared to 9.0% without disabilities. Likewise, the median earning for Iowans age 16 and over with disabilities was \$15,263. Iowans without disabilities age 16 and over earned \$27,207.

It is appalling that Iowans with disabilities have such miserable employment outcomes. When people are unemployed, not only do they suffer, but also their families, friends and the communities in which they live. Unemployment often leads to poverty, and when combined with disability a poverty level existence is almost guaranteed. To assist Iowa to grow and prosper, all citizens are needed in the workforce to support not only their own jobs but also the jobs of others.

Even though our state needs all its' citizens to be in the workforce, and people with disabilities can and want to work, and millions of dollars are spent each year on "services and supports" to help them access employment, the outcomes are poor. There appears to be contradictions within our service system regarding employment options for people with disabilities. While there have been some changes in our systems there still remains disincentives to work. As Neil Romano, when he was Assistant Secretary of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the Department of Labor wrote:

"The greatest challenges are not with employers or people with disabilities themselves, but with our public system of disability assistance. Limited coordination of benefits and services across agencies and conflicting policies make it more difficult for a youth or adult with a disability to become self-sufficient and participate fully in all the benefits our nation has to offer. "

This is not an Iowa issue. It is a national issue. Thirteen states are in some stage of an Employment First Initiative. These include:

- Delaware
- Kansas
- Tennessee
- Minnesota
- Georgia
- Indiana
- Missouri
- Wisconsin
- Washington
- California
- Vermont
- Colorado
- Oklahoma
- Massachusetts

All these states have changed, are in the process of changing, or in the process of identifying needed changes to ensure that integrated employment is the expected and preferred outcome for people with disabilities. It might not be called Employment First, but the desired outcome is the same.

Likewise, 14 national organizations have joined together and formed the Alliance for Full Participation (AFP). AFP is united in its commitment to the successful inclusion of people with developmental disabilities into the mainstream of American life. The member organizations have set as their employment goal *doubling the employment rate of people with disabilities by 2015.*

Organizations belonging to AFP include:

- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD)
- American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR)
- APSE: The Employment Network
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)
- Autism Society of America (ASA)
- Best Buddies International
- National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities (NACDD)
- National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP)
- The Arc of United States
- The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS)
- NISH
- United Cerebral Palsy (UCP)
- The Council on Quality and Leadership
- Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE)

Their Statement on Employment is quite clear:

Individuals with developmental disabilities want to work in integrated settings along with their non-disabled colleagues. They want to be afforded the same wages, benefits, and opportunities to advance in their careers, and contribute to society and move out of poverty.

The Iowa Employment First Initiative will move our state forward by ensuring that for all working-age citizens with disabilities, like their peers without disabilities, competitive employment will be the first, expected, and preferred outcome of all services and supports.