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Employment First Across the States

“Employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age citizens with disabilities, regardless of level of disability.” This is the [position statement](#) on Employment First by APSE (The Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst).¹ Employment First is a concept to facilitate the full inclusion of people with the most significant disabilities in the workplace and community.² It shapes policy and practice from the presumption that all working age adults and youths with disabilities can work in jobs fully integrated within the general workforce, side-by-side with co-workers without disabilities, at minimum wage or higher.¹

Across the country, states have taken varied approaches to establishing Employment First in their state. According to the Institute on Community Inclusion’s [Policy Research Brief: Employment First Across the Nation: Progress on the Policy Front](#), 46 states have taken some level of activity on Employment First.³ Thirty-two states have taken formal policy action (fourteen agency directives; four executive orders; eight legislation; and five legislation and directive or executive orders). On June 1, 2011 Louisiana’s Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities issued the following [position statement](#): “Employment will be the primary outcome for all persons receiving OCDD services who are of working age.”⁴

Some states, such as Tennessee, have taken a proactive approach in pursuing Employment First policy and practice for people with disabilities. In June 2013 Governor Bill Haslam established the Tennessee Employment First Initiative to expand community employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities. The Task Force concluded its first year on August 1, 2014, providing the following recommendations.²

1. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding among state agencies to facilitate coordination across programs.
2. Engage and support Tennessee businesses in employing people with disabilities.
3. Make the State of Tennessee a model employer of people with disabilities, including the expansion of opportunities for internships.
4. Ensure every student with a disability leaves high school with a smooth transition that would include a choice of (but not be limited to) postsecondary education, a job training program, or paid, integrated employment to the same extent as students without disabilities.
5. Support individuals with disabilities and their families by increasing their knowledge about the benefits of employment as a life goal.
6. Ensure that all working-age Tennesseans with disabilities have access to a system of supports that enables them to obtain and maintain employment in the community throughout their lives.
7. Create and implement a three-year strategic workforce development plan.



Employment First policies portray a dedication to affording people with disabilities the opportunity to share their strengths and skills with the community through work. However, it is important to remember that inclusion or exclusion of the specific term “Employment First” does not determine whether a public system or agency has adopted Employment First principles.¹ Such a determination can only be made by close inspection of policy for evidence of the presumptions described above and subsequent practice leading to measurable increases in employment of individuals with disabilities within the general workforce, earning minimum wage or higher with benefits.

The ultimate goal of Employment First is for more people with disabilities to work in community-based competitive jobs. Having a policy does not guarantee that people with disabilities will obtain employment or the employment systems will perform more effectively. Wider systems change must also occur to include changes to practices and expectations.³ Changes in Louisiana’s system must be made to realize the following characteristics of successful Employment First states:

- Young people with disabilities have work experiences that are typical of others.
- Individuals with disabilities have greater opportunities to pursue and advance their careers by taking full advantage of their individual strengths and talents, including the opportunity for self-employment.
- Funding is sufficient so that quality services and supports are available for success in long-term community-based competitive employment.
- A decision not to consider employment in the community for an individual is re-evaluated on a regular basis; the reasons and rationale for this decision are fully documented and addressed in service provision.

¹ APSE Statement on Employment First. (2010). <http://www.apse.org/employment-first/statement/>

² State of Tennessee, Employment First Task Force, Expect Employment, Executive Summary. (2014). http://www.tn.gov/didd/employment-1st/docs/taskforce/ExpectEmployment-Sept_2014.pdf

³ Derek North and David Hoff. Policy Research Brief: Employment First Across the Nation: Progress on the Policy Front. (2014). <http://ici.umn.edu/index.php?products/view/587>

⁴ State of Louisiana, Department of Health and Hospitals, Office for Citizens with developmental Disabilities. (2011). <http://new.dhh.louisiana.gov/index.cfm/newsroom/detail/1778>