

Employment First in Virginia

Employment First is a national movement rooted in the premise that all people, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of competitive, community-based employment. Employment First is a framework for systems change efforts. The initiative calls for raising expectations, implementing better practices, and aligning policies and reimbursement structures to promote competitive, integrated employment opportunities for **all**.

Employment First in Virginia

In February 2012, Virginia Senate Joint Resolution No. 127 was passed, establishing a formal Employment First policy in the Commonwealth. Employment in the general workforce is the **first** and **preferred** option for Virginians with disabilities receiving assistance from publicly financed systems. A publicly financed system is a system that is funded by or receives funds from the government. Some examples may include The Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), Community Services Board (CSB), and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS).

Competitive, Integrated Employment

The United States Office of Disability and Employment Policy and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) both have definitions for competitive, integrated employment. Their definitions include work that:

- is paid directly by the employer at the greater of minimum or prevailing wages with commensurate benefits
- is occurring in a location where the employee with a disability has the opportunity to interact with coworkers without disabilities to the same extent as employees without disabilities in comparable positions do
- allows for opportunity for advancement and job mobility similar to employees without disabilities in like positions, where appropriate
- is performed on a full or part-time basis

Benefits of Employment First

Promoting the Employment First initiative and increasing participation in competitive, integrated employment encourages a variety of positive outcomes. As Department of Labor Secretary Thomas E.

Perez wrote in his blog, “Competitive integrated employment works — for individuals, for employers and for society. Models have shown repeatedly that people previously considered ‘unemployable’ can work, can be productive and can achieve independence. As such, investing in this approach is a wise use of public funds.”

Competitive, community-based employment allows individuals with disabilities to have the opportunity to increase their personal and financial independence and engage in experiences that positively contribute to their professional and personal growth, identities, and self-esteem. Studies have shown that through employing people with disabilities, including people with significant disabilities, businesses are able to better diversify their workforce, can increase their productivity, and can improve their bottom line. Furthermore, increased participation of people with significant disabilities in the general workforce has a positive financial impact on the economy, reduces reliance on public assistance, and promotes a more inclusive society.

Impact on Youth and Families

The Employment First initiative does not just impact adult services. With the combination of Employment First and WIOA, there is an increased emphasis on educators effectively supporting students with disabilities to prepare for competitive, integrated employment. In Virginia, all students develop Academic and Career Plans in middle school, and every student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) begins receiving transition planning services the year they turn 14.

To effectively prepare students for the world of work, it is imperative that youth, at an early age, begin to learn what employment means and to explore their interests, strengths, and preferences as they relate to the world of work. For many people, and especially people with significant disabilities, learning through experiences is the most effective way to discover what working means and to identify career areas of interest. Examples of how families and educators can support experiential learning include:

- facilitating formal and informal tours of local businesses and supporting individuals to ask questions about employees’ roles, responsibilities, and qualifications
- arranging job shadowing at a family member or friend’s place of business
- coordinating internship experiences
- supporting volunteering in the community

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