



Why Minnesota Needs an Employment First Policy



Minnesota needs an Employment First Policy to challenge the pervasive belief that most citizens with disabilities cannot work successfully in the regular workforce. This belief can be a greater barrier to employment than the disabling condition. The employment rate for Minnesotans with disabilities is 44% compared to 81% for other citizens, and nationally nearly two-thirds (65%) of citizens trapped in long-term poverty have disabilities. Minnesota needs an Employment First policy to change those statistics by making employment in the regular workforce a viable option considered by citizens with disabilities. Most Minnesotans with disabilities “choose” unemployment and under-employment because they do not have access to the information and experiences they need to make an informed choice about employment in the regular workforce.

To make an informed choice about employment in the regular workforce, Minnesotans with disabilities need:

- Positive encouragement and support from their inner circle of family, friends, educators, and paid professionals who assist them.
- Clear information about Social Security benefits, healthcare coverage, and work incentives that protect government benefits and access to health insurance.
- Access to contemporary practices, technologies and accommodations which make work an option for individuals once considered “unemployable,” such as supported and customized employment, Individual Placement and Support for people living with a mental illness, and specialized employment supports for people who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, blind or have other sensory or physical disabilities.
- Information about the social, career, health, mental health and economic benefits of a working life.

The lack of expectations about their potential for adult employment impacts citizens with disabilities from an early age. It often means they do not have the experiences and opportunities that lead to successful employment for citizens without disabilities. Youth with disabilities, like their peers, need experiences such as chores at home, working for a neighbor, having a short-term job while attending school, a high school diploma and others which provide a foundation for future employment. Without these typical life experiences, Minnesotans with disabilities cannot make an informed choice about employment.

Minnesotans with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities, can be successfully employed at regular jobs in the community using employment practices that are person-centered, evidenced based and emphasize their strengths and interests. There are many ways people can make a living including working for pay in available job vacancies, working for themselves as business entrepreneurs, and working in jobs that are “custom built” around the interests, skills, and strengths people have. We need to shift our perspective from the presumption that Minnesotans with disabilities cannot work to the presumption that they can and focus on their strengths and abilities rather than on skills they lack.

Minnesota is the 32nd state in the nation to adopt an Employment First Policy to make regular employment in typical workplaces a reality for citizens with disabilities. Employment First means:

- Regular employment is the first and expected outcome but not the only outcome individuals can choose.
- People with disabilities have services and supports tailored to meet their needs in a job which is a match for their strengths, interests and skills with ongoing supports where needed for long-term retention.

We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.