

APSE FACT SHEET: EMPLOYMENT FIRST

What is Employment First?

Employment First, means that employment in the general workforce should be the first and preferred option for individuals with disabilities receiving assistance from publicly funded systems. Simply put, Employment First means real jobs, real wages.

What does “employment in the general workforce” mean?

Employment in the general workforce means regular jobs like everyone else in society: in typical work settings, working side-by-side with people without disabilities, earning regular wages and benefits and being part of the economic mainstream of our society.

How is Employment First different?

- Typically, when it came to publicly funded services, employment in the community has been among a number of choices presented to people with disabilities, and in many cases individuals have been shuttled to facility-based segregated services. Under Employment First, assistance to find a job in the community, and become a tax-paying citizen, is the preferred choice.
- Employment First starts with a presumption that a person with a disability can work. Unlike other individuals of working age in our society, where it’s presumed they will become employed, people with disabilities have too often had to demonstrate their “readiness” for employment. Under Employment First, it is assumed that individuals are capable of working until proven otherwise, and employment in the general workforce is the first option pursued. If a decision is made that the individual won’t pursue employment at the current time is made, then other service options can be explored – i.e., Employment First is not Employment Only.

Why Employment First?

Per the US Department of Labor, the workforce participation rate for individuals with disabilities is about 1/3 that of people without disabilities. The low employment rate for people has been increasingly recognized as a serious societal issue, with over 13 million adults of working age in the United States receiving disability benefits from Social Security. Yet it has been continuously shown that with assistance, accommodations, and encouragement, many more people with disabilities can work successfully in the community.

Employment First: A Road Out of Poverty

Statistics clearly show that if you have a disability you are much more likely to be poor. Working age adults with disabilities living below the poverty line at twice the rate of the general population (US Census). Almost two-thirds (65%) of the individuals in poverty long-term are people with disabilities (Mathematica Policy Research). Focusing our public resources on Employment First, providing the assistance necessary to find and succeed in employment, is a road out of poverty, dependence, and isolation, for individuals with disabilities.

APSE Statement on Employment First

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.

What is the status of Employment First?

There are over 35 states with some type of effort focused on Employment First. At least 21 of these states have an official state policy, stating that employment in the community is the first and preferred service option for people with disabilities.

Does Employment First make a difference?

Yes. For example, in the area of employment services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Washington State has a long-standing commitment to policies and practices focused on employment in the community as the first priority. The end result is that 89% of individuals served by the Washington State system are in integrated employment services, compared to a national average of 20%. Many states are even well below this average with some at less than 10%.

What is the role of the federal government?

APSE is urging Congress and the federal government to support legislation and policies that will make Employment First a national policy. There are a large number of areas within federal policymaking that can be utilized to support Employment First. The following are two examples:

- CMS spends approximately \$500 million per year for segregated day programs, while spending slightly above \$100 million per year to support competitive employment. Through an Employment First policy, CMS would over time essentially reverse these figures, with the vast majority of funds going to support competitive employment. (CMS has begun making efforts in term of policy guidance to increase the use of Medicaid funds being used to support employment in the community.
- In the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), employment is listed as one of the outcomes of transition from school to adult life. IDEA could be strengthened with language that states that the preferred outcome of transition service is employment in the general workforce, and also strengthens requirements for real work experience in the community while individuals are in school. This is particularly important, given that work experience during teenage years is a strong predictor of employment success as an adult.

About APSE

APSE, the *Association of People Supporting Employment First*, is the only national organization with an exclusive focus on integrated employment and career advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities. APSE is a 3,000+ growing national non-profit membership organization, founded in 1988. Our members include individuals with disabilities, families, disability professionals, and businesses.

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