



Promoting Employment First During COVID-19

APSE is a national, member-based organization dedicated to the goal of improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Our members include supported workers, supported employment professionals (including job coaches and job developers), state workforce, VR and Medicaid representatives and other stakeholders who are committed to promoting the principles of Employment First.

At APSE, our top priority continues to be the health and safety of our members. We continue to monitor emerging guidance related to COVID-19 and are doing our best to get information out to you in real-time. We encourage our members to defer to your state and local guidance regarding who should or shouldn't report to work at this time. As the only national organization committed to promoting Employment First, we are working hard to ensure that as many workers with disabilities (and those who support them) remain in the workforce as possible.

We recognize that many parts of the country have called for only "essential workers" to report, and we fully support compliance with the guidance you may be receiving. However, we know that many supported workers are classified as essential staff – especially those working in grocery stores and similar retail, hospitals, etc. If these workers have no underlying health concerns, they SHOULD report to work as instructed, practice frequent hand-washing and other mitigation strategies, as well as follow the guidelines offered by their employer.

We also recognize the need for ongoing supports during this time. Supported workers may need assistance to fully understand universal precautions, to quickly adjust work tasks and to ensure communications are understood. Additionally, there is need to provide assistance to address anxiety and other emotional responses as best as possible.

To that end, we are actively working with other national disability organizations to seek Federal guidance and to classify direct support staff (including job coaches) as protected and essential staff to ensure that people with disabilities receive the supports they are entitled to under VR and Medicaid. How these supports are delivered is going to vary by state and locality, but APSE fully supports and encourages the use of available technology to provide remote services those receiving employment supports from employment support professionals.



Of critical concern for us is ensuring that supported employment and other employment services remain operational and available in states. We are hearing from our members that employment services are becoming harder and harder to access. We are also aware that large numbers of supported workers and their employment supports staff are facing furloughs.

- We are placing special emphasis on ensuring people with disabilities who CAN work have the supports they need to remain successful in their jobs while remaining safe and healthy.
- We are also monitoring emerging needs in the workforce with an eye on continuing to promote inclusive hiring practices (e.g., grocery stores, retail distribution centers, hospitals and health centers, etc.).
- This means providing training to employment specialists on new ways of doing business, including the use of alternative/technology-based strategies for providing employment supports.

This also means advocating to federal and state governments to ensure flexibility in billing options for providers to keep dollars flowing so that services can remain operational. We are specifically working with our partners in the disability community around the following asks of Congress.

- We need increased Medicaid funding and HCBS grants to ensure services for people with disabilities, including employment supports, remain operational.
- Provider agencies, the majority of whom are not-for-profit organizations who receive Medicaid funds, must be able to access small business loans to cover costs and keep their doors open.
 - NOTE: This provision WAS included in the COVID-19 Package #3 stimulus!
- Emergency income relief must include people with disabilities without a detrimental impact on their other benefits, including healthcare.
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We are also engaged in state advocacy, with an emphasis on getting direct support professionals (including job coaches and job developers) classified as essential workers, as well as exploring flexibilities in service delivery for employment and related supports funded by Medicaid LTSS and VR.

APSE is here to be a resource, so please feel free to reach out – especially as it relates to disability employment needs. You can reach us at info@apse.org. For State and/or Federal policy questions, email julie@apse.org.