

# **Report from the Employment First Summit**

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**Supported By**

**Illinois' Employment and Economic Opportunity for People with Disabilities  
Task Force**

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**Task Force Event Planning Committee**

Marsie Frawley  
Margaret Harkness  
Robin Jones  
Phil Milsk  
Sharon Slover  
Susan Walter

**This report was written by  
David Hoff  
of the Institute for Community Inclusion  
University of Massachusetts Boston**

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## **Employment First Summit Report**

### *Executive Summary*

In August 2009, the Illinois legislature established the [Employment and Economic Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities Task Force](#). This task force was established in response to the chronic low employment rate of people with disabilities in Illinois, and the lack of progress in increasing the workforce participation of people with disabilities.

In January 2011, the Task Force submitted its [annual report](#) to the Governor and Legislature, and that report included a recommendation that Illinois become an Employment First state – i.e., that employment in the community be the first and preferred option for individuals with disabilities receiving publicly funded services in Illinois. To enact this recommendation, the Task Force developed plans for an Employment First Summit. The invitation-only Summit was held on January 31, 2012 and included a cross-section of individuals with disabilities, family members, policymakers, advocates, disability professionals, and educators. This report summarizes the findings from the summit, and lays out a series of recommendations for turning the vision of Employment First discussed at the summit into reality. This *Executive Summary* contains a summary of the recommendations developed as a result of the summit, while the *Full Report* contains much greater detail on these recommendations, along with extensive documentation of the proceedings, links to a wide array of resources within the text, and an extensive series of resources in the appendix.

### **Employment of People With Disabilities In Illinois: Current Status**

In many ways, the challenges of employment of people with disabilities in Illinois are a microcosm of the challenges of workforce participation of people with disabilities nationally. Per US Census data, while 69% of all adults in Illinois participate in the workforce, only 35% of adults with disabilities participate. Workforce participation for adults with cognitive disabilities is even lower, standing at 25%. These figures are reflective of similar trends nationally.

The data clearly show there are areas of significant needs in terms of employment services and supports for people with disabilities, making the case for fundamental changes to increase the workforce participation of individuals with disabilities in Illinois. The data also show inconsistencies within specific state public systems in Illinois that assist and support individuals with disabilities, and indicate areas of need in terms of focus within specific service systems. At the same time there are pockets of success that can be built upon as Illinois moves forward to embrace Employment First and improve the lives of its citizens with disabilities through full workforce participation.

## **Employment First Strategic Plan: Areas of Focus**

One of the core goals of the Employment First Summit was to develop the basis of an Employment First Strategic Plan for Illinois. The following seven areas were identified to form the basis of this plan.

1. Public agency systems change and policy
2. Data measurement, evaluation, accountability
3. Service and support capacity/development
4. Funding – paying for what we want, creating incentives
5. Transition, post-secondary education, career advancement
6. Family and individual awareness/expectations
7. Business and community development

### **1) PUBLIC AGENCY SYSTEMS CHANGE AND POLICY**

For Illinois citizens with disabilities, there are a number of public agencies that assist and support them with their needs. These include:

- **Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD)** – Department of Human Services
- **Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS)** – Department of Human Services
- **Division of Mental Health (DMH)** – Department of Human Services
- **Workforce Development** - Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) & Department of Employment Security (IDES)
- **Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)**

In addition, there are federal agencies such as Veterans Affairs, and the Social Security Administration (SSA). Forward progress on implementation of an Employment First agenda will require that the resources of these agencies be used in different ways, and that the services and supports they provide be in synch with Employment First.

Consider issuing an Employment First Policy: To set the stage for Employment First effort and the systems change effort that will be necessary, Illinois should consider issuing an Employment First policy via policy directive, legislation, or similar mechanism, which is cross-disability and applies across state agencies. Such a policy, that clearly defines Employment First, will ensure that the vision regarding the direction in the use of public resources to support Illinois citizens with disabilities is both clearly understood and supported at the highest levels of government.

Additional recommendations: Additional specific recommendations in regard to public agency systems change and policy include:

- Defining the “Service System” and current structure, by creating a matrix of the current service system, in terms of agencies, number of individuals served, funding, services provided, etc.
- Cross-agency buy-in and support of Employment First through development of an ongoing integrated planning process, and development of specific policies within each agency that reinforce and actualize the principles of Employment First.
- Creation of a seamless, user-friendly system, through: a) Increased seamlessness with DRS, DDD, DMH; b) Creation of a common intake system; c) Exploration of a common case management/data system; d) Exploring the use of a common identifier for all individuals served; e) Creation of an on-line service portal.

- Creation of a cross-agency coordinator role in the Governor’s office, to act as a linkage across systems.
- Examine experiences of other states that have experienced success in increasing the workforce participation of individuals with disabilities through public agency systems change for “lessons learned” that can be applied in Illinois.

## **2) DATA MEASUREMENT, EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY**

Having strong data systems is a critical component in terms of understanding and analyzing system performance, and ensuring accountability. The following are recommendations in terms of strengthening the current data systems in Illinois that track employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

- Identify the current data collected on employment of people with disabilities in Illinois and make an effort to consolidate it.
- Create an improved employment data collection system to better track outcomes and processes, using the current data systems as a basis.
- Create systems for making data publicly available as a key piece of understanding performance and ensuring accountability.
- Use data as a management and accountability tool through development of training, tools, and mechanisms so that system staff, service providers, and individuals with disabilities have a high level of access to data, understand how to best utilize data for monitoring of services on an individual job seeker and programmatic level, and also identify areas for improvement on an individual service delivery and programmatic level.
- Identify opportunities for taking advantage of today’s technology for data collection, reporting, and analysis including the use of the World Wide Web for collection and reporting of data, as well as the use of Smart Phone Apps, and similar technology advancements.
- Identify examples from other states of states with strong data systems that can be learned from.

## **3) SERVICE AND SUPPORT CAPACITY/DEVELOPMENT**

Having a strong service system that is capable of consistently providing high quality employment assistance and supports is critical to realizing the vision of Employment First. Specific recommendations for improving the capacity of the service system are the following:

- Creation of staff competency standards for staff providing employment services and supports in Illinois.
- Providing resources for ongoing staff training and development and ensure that the training received by staff is linked with competency standards for staff.
- Ensure organizational capacity and competency through development of standards for employment programs that are in line with Employment First principles, and incorporate these standards within contracting, program monitoring, and quality assurance mechanisms.
- Encourage service providers to make internal shifts in terms of their organizational focus, through the availability of technical assistance, and access to information on organizational transformation.
- Transform service models from a Monday to Friday/9 to 3 service model, through:
  - a) development of strategies for addressing of the “day custody” issue – i.e., what individuals will do with their time when they are not working, particularly individuals who need some

level of supervision, while avoiding having facility-based services as the de facto answer; b) development of service models that are flexible in their ability to provide supports during the wide variety of hours that individuals may work.

- Undertake methods for greater utilization of the resources of the workforce development system available to all job seekers, through creating greater awareness among service providers and individuals with disabilities regarding the system's resources and exploration of options for leveraging and enhancing collaboration between the workforce development system and disability service systems and providers.
- Enhance awareness of and access to existing resources in Illinois and nationally, such as those focused on assistive technology, transportation, etc.
- Address issues related to the perception of benefits as a barrier to employment, through ensuring there are consistent, clear, and accurate messages regarding benefits, increasing the knowledge base of all staff regarding benefits, and increasing the availability of benefits assistance.
- Individuals with disabilities from diverse backgrounds are often under-served, and as part of general capacity building, it is recommended that efforts be made to increase the capacity to meet the needs of individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic cultures.
- Develop service provider networks for exchange of ideas, sharing of information, and provision of mutual support.

#### **4) FUNDING – PAYING FOR WHAT WE WANT, CREATING INCENTIVES**

As funding is a primary driver of service system outcomes, the vision of Employment First cannot be achieved without a funding structure that provides sufficient resources and incentives for delivery of quality services, focused on achieving integrated community employment. To achieve this objective, the following strategies are recommended:

- Redesign existing service provider funding, with the following elements: a) Funding rates, based on real costs and achieving outcomes, and not based solely based on consumer contact hours and/or maximizing billable hours; b) Funding rates that reward service providers for efficient and effective use of resources, including job searches that occur at a reasonable pace and result in long-term job retention; c) Incentives for maximizing the income and number of hours that an individual works; d) A funding system that encourages and maximizes the use of natural and community supports, and minimizes over-reliance on professional staff; e) A funding system that ensures a balance between quantity and quality of outcomes; f) Funding rates that ensure that the needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities can be met.
- Make changes in Medicaid funding through revamping of existing waivers, to increase hourly reimbursement rates, and provide greater incentives for community employment.
- Improve transition between funding sources, particularly between DRS and long-term support agencies, through the development of guidelines and parameters so there is clarity regarding the responsibilities of the various agencies and service providers.
- Examine the use of education funding to determine how such funding can be better utilized to support employment experiences for students who are still in school, and ensure a smooth transition from school-based funding to adult service funding as necessary.
- Determine the true costs of employment services to ensure that rates are set in a way that allows service providers to focus on employment in the community, provides the necessary



resources for fiscal viability of service providers, and allows individuals to have a choice regarding providers.

- Explore increased opportunities for more self-directed funding options that put more control and discretion on the use of funds in the hands of individuals and families.
- Increase use of Social Security funding options including Ticket to Work, PASS, IRWE, etc.
- Create mechanisms for stronger coordination among funding streams on an individual, service provider, and systems level, and greater monitoring of the various funding streams being utilized.
- To increase support for Employment First efforts, make the case for the cost effectiveness of employment services and supports to legislators, policymakers, and the general public.
- Consult with other states regarding how they have designed their funding systems in a way that creates incentives and supports enhanced community employment outcomes.

## **5) TRANSITION, POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

Key to moving forward on Employment First, is ensuring that every student with a disability has typical teenage employment experiences, and is properly prepared for employment as an adult, while decreasing the use of facility-based services as a accepted outcome of transition. The following recommendations are steps for moving forward towards achieving these objectives.

- Through education and training, ensure that parents are aware of their rights in terms of transition, and how to develop effective IEP goals in terms of their teen's transition.
- Create an expectation early on among young people, parents, and educators, that when students with disabilities leave school they will have jobs, and work and live in the community like all other citizens.
- Develop curricula for teachers and parents that emphasize evidence based, transition practices that lead to employment.
- Consider revisiting Illinois Administrative Code Part 226 and other ISBE rules on transition, to determine if they need to be strengthened in terms of transition and employment.
- Consider policies that make it clear that employment in the community is the expected outcome of transition, and that prohibit or discourage the use of facility-based services during transition or as an outcome.
- Undertake efforts to expand the use of Transition Coordinator positions within school districts throughout the state.
- Integrate students with disabilities in existing career and technical education programs, career exploration, employment and internship options that are available to all students, and use the disability support services to assist in their participation.
- Explore how individuals with significant disabilities can become more integrated within vocational and technical schools.
- Encourage stronger use of post-secondary settings, and use of service learning leading to employment as part of the transition experience.
- Enhance the tracking system for students in transition, in order to properly monitor services, as well as evaluate employment outcomes.

## **6) FAMILY AND INDIVIDUAL AWARENESS/EXPECTATIONS**

Changing family and individual awareness and expectations regarding employment is a critical component of Employment First. The following are recommendations for ensuring that individuals and families are receiving consistent pro-employment messages.

- Identify avenues for information sharing that are trusted sources, through mapping out the full range of entities that serve as information and communication mechanisms for individuals and families, including: general disability advocacy groups, disability specific advocacy groups schools, health care workers, service providers, parent and family networks.
- Create messages that include the following elements: a) The efforts of Illinois regarding Employment First; b) A clear basic message that individuals with disabilities are capable of working in the community; c) Expectations that individuals with disabilities can work successfully and have careers like anyone else; d) Understanding that the shift in Illinois is part of a national movement to community employment; e) The financial and non-financial benefits of employment; f) That public benefits are not a barrier to employment; g) Information on employment rights and responsibilities; h) Information on best practices in transition leading to employment outcomes, h) Understanding service options and funding sources.
- Catalog examples of existing employment-related materials for individuals and families, to determine if they are useful as is, or can be utilized as a basis for creating materials.
- Use of peer-to-peer networks of individuals and families to share information and a pro-employment message.
- In awareness and communication, consider cross-cultural issues in terms of materials development and outreach.

## **7) BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

It is not possible to fulfill the vision of Employment First without the willingness of employers to hire individuals with disabilities. The following are strategies for strengthening relationships with employers and the business community in ways that increase hiring of individuals with disabilities, with a focus on a “one job - one jobseeker” at a time approach.

- a) Develop opportunities for ongoing dialogue between the business community and service providers
- b) Work to ensure access by disability service providers and job seekers with disabilities on access to labor market information (LMI) in a way that promotes general understanding regarding the diversity of the labor market, as well as an ability to use LMI to meet the needs of individual job seekers.
- c) Develop partnerships with workforce development and economic development to ensure that individuals with disabilities are included in employer initiatives and business start-ups.
- d) Consider the development of regional job developer networking groups for peer support, and more coordinated efforts regarding job development.
- e) Develop strategies to increase public employment at the federal, state, and local government level.
- f) Develop strategies to ensure that self-employment is a viable option for more individuals with disabilities, with a focus in part on use of existing resources available from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and other sources to assist any entrepreneur.

- g) Ensure that programs and staff are well versed in strategies for job creation and job carving, rather than simply focusing on existing job openings.

In addition to strategies for increasing engagement of employers, Employment First efforts should also focus on community development, to address such areas as transportation issues. Other options for engaging community resources in support of Employment First should be considered, such as civic groups, community colleges, anti-poverty programs, community-based minority organizations, etc. to gain their support for increasing the workforce participation of Illinois citizens with disabilities forward.

### **Next Steps**

The Employment First Summit created a strong beginning and basis to build from. At the summit, the following were the next steps identified for moving forward on realizing the vision of Employment First.

- Forming of work groups around the seven areas identified. These work groups will take the initial framework developed for each of these issues, and from there create a more detailed work plan for addressing each of these areas, and then work on implementation of that plan.
- An electronic communication mechanism will be set up through a message board, list serv, or social networking platform, and also potentially an on-line project management platform.
- Determination of the mechanism for oversight and coordination of efforts, and the role of the Employment and Economic Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities Task Force in the management and coordination of the various work groups efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Gerry Provencal, a long-time advocate for individuals with disabilities once stated, *“We’re far too patient with the passage of time for people with disabilities. Time is as precious for a person with a disability as it is for all of us.”* The Employment First movement in Illinois and nationally recognizes that is time for all of us to stop being patient and to create a sense of urgency in terms of ensuring that people with disability have the same employment opportunities as all other citizens. The time has come for our society to welcome people with disabilities into the economic mainstream with real jobs and real wages, that allow them to be full participants in our society with the same opportunities as all other Americans.

### **Employment First Resources:**

- [APSE Statement on Employment First](http://www.apse.org) – [www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)
- [APSE White Paper - Establishing a National Employment First Agenda](http://www.apse.org) – [www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)
- [SELN Employment First Resource List](http://www.seln.org) – [www.seln.org](http://www.seln.org)