

Iowa's Employment First Initiative: Statement of Findings



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Iowa's Employment First Initiative

Statement of Findings

Iowans with disabilities, as their peers without disabilities, possess the right and responsibility to work. Iowans with disabilities, as their peers without disabilities, should have the opportunity to live their life to the fullest and contribute toward their own self-sufficiency.

Vision of Iowa Employment First

Iowans with disabilities are employed at the same rate as other Iowans and receiving equal benefits.

Mission of Employment First

To change beliefs, practices, systems and funding and so that employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age Iowans with disabilities, regardless of level of disability.

History of Iowa Employment First Initiative

In 2009 representatives of Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP), Iowa Disability Navigator Program (DPN), the Governor's Developmental Disability Council, the Iowa Chapter of APSE: The Employment Network (IA-APSE), Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), and the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) began planning for the Iowa Employment First Initiative. Driven by the belief that all Iowans with disabilities should have the opportunity for employment as do their peers without disabilities, information was gathered by using focus groups held throughout the state to answer the question:

How do we make competitive employment the 1st priority and the expected and preferred outcome of all Iowans with disabilities?

These focus groups generated over 4,000 ideas, including 1,400 innovative actions to take to move toward the vision of Employment First. From this statewide information five goals or strategies emerged:

- Policies and funding dollars are aligned with Employment First
- Individuals with disabilities and family members advocate for Employment First and participate in the design of employment services and supports
- Businesses influence businesses to create employment opportunities
- Strong partnerships remove barriers to employment outcomes
- Best practice models drive successful post high school outcomes for working, learning, and living.

To date, two Summits have been held to share the goals, set more specific direction, and gather more input. The first was held October 2009. Approximately 75 people attended to be part of this historical Initiative. Specific actions and timelines were developed during the Summit by large group presentations, world cafés, and facilitated small group discussions. During the Summit, individuals identified their desired level of involvement. From that, a Steering Committee was identified and the structure of the group developed.

Given that one of the goals relates to transition from school to work, the Employment First Initiative partnered with the Iowa Department of Education for the second Summit. Their 2010 Parent Educator Connection Conference was focusing on transition and the Employment First Initiative directed the Employment track of the Conference. The two-day Conference attracted over 300 participants.

Why an Iowa Employment First Initiative?

With the baby boom generation retiring and stricter laws regarding immigration, people with disabilities are the last untapped labor source in Iowa and the country. According to the 2010 U.S. Census American Community Survey there are 33,861,981 Americans with disabilities over the age of 16. Of these, only 21.8% of the individuals were employed compared to 64.2% of the individuals without disabilities. According to the 2010 Harris Survey, only 21% of working-age people with disabilities report that they were employed. This is compared to 59% of people without disabilities—a gap of 38%. This same report notes that individuals with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty and less likely to socialize with friends, relatives or neighbors.

Work is a fundamental part of adult life. It gives us a sense of purpose, shaping who we are and how we fit into our community. [6]

In Iowa we see similar statistics. According to the State Data Center [4] there are over 397,000 people with some type of disability living in Iowa over the age of 16. This does not include those in the military, or living in institutions such as prisons or the resource centers. The employment rate in 2010 for Iowans with a disability was 28.5% compared to 70.7% for Iowans without a disability. That results in a 66.9% unemployment rate (unemployed and considered not to be in the labor force). The same report notes that 18.3% of Iowans with disabilities over the age of 16 live in poverty, compared to 10.4% without disabilities. Likewise, the median earning for Iowans age 16 and over with disabilities was \$16,080. Iowans without disabilities age 16 and over earned \$27,826.

These dismal statistics are in spite of the fact that Iowa, like many other states, spends millions of dollars on employment services for individuals with disabilities. Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), the Department of Human Services, and Iowa's County service systems are the largest funding sources used by individuals with disabilities wanting to go to work.

IVRS, or more specifically the Rehabilitation Services Bureau (RSB) of IVRS, has the primary responsibility for overseeing the statewide program of services to all eligible Iowans with disabilities through direct and purchased services from a network of providers. IVRS provides a wide variety of services for persons with disabilities that lead to the person achieving their employment, independence and economic goals. A variety of services are also provided to business and industry to help them meet their workplace and workforce needs. The desired outcome is fulltime or part time competitive employment in the integrated labor market. In the federal fiscal year of 2010, they placed 2,217 individuals with disabilities in competitive employment.

Funding the vocational rehabilitation services provided by IVRS is a federal/state partnership. Currently the federal share is 78.7% of the funds while the state (non-federal) share is 21.3%. The state budget has a major impact on the funds IVRS is able to draw down. The funding of the agency was reduced significantly during FY 10, due to mandated budget reductions and furloughs -- all of which reduced the amount of federal dollars IVRS was able to draw down. IVRS has not been able to draw down all the federal dollars available to it during the fiscal years 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010, and 2011. This has left over \$14 million on the table. This has a major impact on the services it can provide, basically resulting in a waiting list for services.

IVRS focuses only on integrated employment as a placement outcome. In 2001 the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the federal agency that oversees state VR agencies, stated that placements in sheltered workshops would not be considered a successful placement and therefore would not be funded by their dollars.

The other major funders of employment services in Iowa are the Department of Human Services and the counties. Unlike IVRS, their funds may be used for segregated as well as integrated employment services. Using Medicaid and local county dollars, funds are used for such employment related services as Pre-Vocational, Work Activity, Supported Employment, Job Coaching, and Enclave.

In addition to employment related services, Medicaid and the counties fund day service programs including day habilitation, adult day care, supported community living and other vocational services. These services are offered in both segregated and community settings and in some cases contribute in positive and creative ways to increase the independence and community inclusion of the service participants.

There are several major laws and Initiatives influencing services for adults with disabilities. All of these focus on integrated services and supports in the community.

- The **American with Disabilities Act** prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in multiple community arenas, including employment.
- The **Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act** makes provisions for community inclusion of people with developmental disabilities (DD) by establishing entities in each state and territory to protect the rights of people with DD, conduct research into best practices and service delivery, train those working in the field

of DD or preparing to work in the field, build the capacity of communities to include people with DD and advocate for services and supports so that people can live in communities they choose.

- **The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and its' amendments** support competitive employment, economic self-sufficiency, independent living and community integration for individuals with disabilities.
- **The New Freedom Initiative of 2001** was a nation-wide effort to eliminate barriers to community living. Assisting Americans with disabilities to enter the workforce was one of its' goals.
- **The Olmstead Supreme Court Decision** in 1999 requires states to administer their services, programs and activities in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of the qualified individuals with disabilities. Originally thought to only influence residential settings, this has been expanded to also include what a person does during the day, i.e., work.
- **The Year of Community Living** was launched in 2009. Through this Initiative Health and Human Services was directed to identify ways to improve access to housing, community support and independent living arrangements. Community support could include employment supports.

In addition to these laws and policy directives, there are real benefits for individuals working in the community. According to Cimera, [1] the cost-analysis research demonstrates that individuals with disabilities experience greater monetary benefits than costs when working in the community. He goes on to conclude that working in the community makes economic sense for people with disabilities regardless of their diagnoses.

It is not only the worker who benefits. Taxpayers benefit also. In Iowa, for example, for every \$1.00 taxpayers spend on supported employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities, \$1.62 is returned in the form of taxes paid and reduced government subsidies [2].

In spite of these federal laws, clear financial data, and rhetoric supporting integrated services, the majority of individuals with disabilities are still served in segregated settings, both by the nation and Iowa

Consider the following: Iowa Medicaid and counties spent \$42,887,153.00 in state fiscal year 2010 on work services for adults with disabilities. This includes services for people with intellectual disabilities, brain injuries, chronic mental illness, mental illness, and other development disabilities. It also includes participants in Money Follows the Person and Habilitation services. An additional 290 million was spent on non-work related day services including day habilitation, adult day care, supported community living and other vocational services.

The figures depicted in the following chart are the funds spent on the Adult Work Related Services. It is appalling to note that only 21% of these funds are spent on community-based services. That leaves a daunting 79% of our funds spent on Facility

Based Services. This seems incredible when most people with disabilities and their families want to work in the community and there is such a national agenda for integrated services. Individuals with disabilities, their families and advocates, find this unacceptable [5].

SFY Funds Spent on Adult Employment and Day Services In Iowa	
This block represents all the money that is spent on Adult Employment: \$42,887,152.00	
Amount spent on Community Based Work Services: \$8,977,637.00 (21%)	Amount Spent on Facility Based Work Services: \$34,054,612.00 (79%)
People Served 2513	People Served: 3,441
Cost Per Person = \$3,502.	Cost Per Person: \$9,880.

A few additional notes must be added regarding our Iowa figures and services. Given the complexities in Iowa's service and funding systems these figures should be generally, not specifically interpreted. There is also a troubling issue with the Non-Work Related Services. It is unclear what these services entail. Are these services truly in the community, or just another way of re-classifying services that are still provided mainly in a facility? This is a national dilemma [6].

Another reason the large discrepancy between spending on community based employment services and those provided in a facility is so disconcerting is the demands for facility-based services are decreasing. Data from a 2009 parent survey done by the Iowa Department of Education indicated that over 90% of parents, regardless of the severity of their child's disability, expected them to work in the community after graduating from high school [3].

The Initiative

It has been rumored that Iowa's Employment First Initiative wants to close down Sheltered Workshops. This Initiative is not about closing anything.

- It is about recognizing the fundamental right of all Iowans, including those with disabilities, to secure a good job, use their talents and skills, earn a competitive wage and become a contributing member of their community.
- It is about raising the expectations of policy makers, service providers, parents and individuals with disabilities themselves. Real work for real pay should be the expectation, not an exception.

- It is about making sure everyone does his or her fair share. Iowa's workforce is aging. Our state needs all available citizens to work. People with disabilities represent an untapped workforce resource we can no longer ignore.
- It is about changing the status quo for individuals with disabilities. More lowans who have disabilities live in poverty than those who don't, they earn less money and are less educated. This phenomenon is recognized nationally. It must change.
- It is about changing the funding and policies to support integrated employment outcomes.

The original goals of the Initiative have been adjusted as progress was made or the environment changed. In general the five goals turned into four:

Goal 1. Policies and funding are aligned with Employment First and strong partnerships remove barriers.

Goal 2. Individuals with disabilities and family members advocate for Employment First and participate in the design of employment services and supports.

Goal 3: Businesses influence businesses to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities

Goal 4: Best practices drive transition outcomes for living, working and learning.

The Employment First Initiative is moving Iowa forward in providing more integrated employment services. It is well past time that Iowa confronts the soft bigotry of low expectations for people with disabilities. This is a mindset that tolerates dead end careers or no careers at all for people with disabilities on the presumption that they are incapable of doing better. Iowa must take a clear and consistent stand that makes employment the first priority and preferred outcome for people with disabilities.

Because work is so essential, people with disabilities must not be deprived the opportunity to work within the general workforce in their pursuit of health, wealth and happiness. Our public support system must re-engineer itself to fully support this essential part of community engagement. [6]

References

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