

Employment First Maine 2013

Employment First Maine (EFM) is a broad based coalition of individuals with disabilities, families, advocates, providers and state agency representatives committed to improving and enhancing employment outcomes for Maine citizens with disabilities, including veterans with service-connected disabilities. EFM has worked for over 18 months, participated in the national Alliance for Full Participation and is now an active member of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program's Community of Practice.

What would Employment First mean for Maine?

- Employment will be the first and preferred option when exploring goals for citizen with disabilities; that is, everyone will have employment goals as a core service component.
- Greater opportunities will be provided for citizens with disabilities to pursue self-employment and the development of microenterprises.
- Citizens with disabilities will be employed within the general workforce, regardless of the severity of disability and assistance required.
- Young people with disabilities will have work experiences that are typical of other teenagers and young adults.
- Employers will include people with disabilities within general recruitment and hiring efforts as standard practice.
- Individuals with disabilities will have increased incomes, financial assets, and economic wealth.
- Citizens with disabilities will have greater opportunities to advance in their careers, by taking full advantage of their individual strengths and talents.
- Funding will be sufficient so that quality services and supports are available as needed for long term employment success.
- There will be measurable increases in employment of citizens with disabilities within the general workforce, earning minimum wage or higher with benefits.
- For individuals who are not working, the decision to not consider employment in the community will be re-evaluated on a regular basis; the reasons and rationale for this decision will be fully documented and addressed in service provision.

Contact Rick Langley at the Disability Rights Center (rlangley@drcme.org) to get on the email distribution list.

About Employment First

Over the past decade, the concept of Employment First – the idea that employment in integrated settings within the community should be the priority service option - has emerged in the disability field, as well as in state policy, regulation and legislation.

Nationally, Employment First policy has been defined as (1) an official directive from a state government agency that employment in the community in the general workforce is the first and primary option for individuals with disabilities; or (2) it is the intent of the state to move in that direction. In Maine, the Department of Health and Human Services established a policy in 2010 stating that the DHHS “shall support career development and meaningful employment for all working aged individuals receiving services through the Department”. In addition, since 2005, the Maine Department of Labor’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services has only funded individuals who are working toward competitive employment. DHHS and DOL have been working together closely over the past several years toward ensuring that individuals with significant disabilities realize competitive employment in their communities.

The distressing employment outcomes realized by individuals with disabilities across the country – in 2012 the participation rate of people with disabilities in the labor force was 31.1% as compared to 77.7% for working age adults without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Standards) – has been a catalyst for Employment First across the United States:

- Twenty states have been identified as having something akin to an official Employment First policy. Seven states have passed legislation: California, Delaware, Kansas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Utah, and Washington. The other thirteen (Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee) have a policy directive, Executive Order, or similar official policy statement.
- Seven of these policies are cross-disability: Arkansas, Delaware, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, Virginia, and Utah. The other states have policies that focus exclusively on individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington.
- In addition to the 20 states with Employment First policies, the other 14 states (Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Texas, Wisconsin) have Employment First efforts and initiatives underway, but at this point it appears no official Employment First policy has been issued.

Adapted from ICI/UMass Boston’s Supported Employment Leadership Network Update (November, 2012)