



# Survival Coalition

of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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## EMPLOYMENT FIRST INITIATIVE

### Background

**Employment First** is a national grassroots movement by people with disabilities and disability advocates that is helping states improve their economies by getting people with disabilities employed and reducing reliance on public systems. Employment First initiatives implement policies, programs, and services to promote competitive employment in the general workforce for people with any type of disability. Employment refers to working for a competitive wage in a community-based job (i.e., a job that is not based in a community rehabilitation facility). The employment should be in a work setting that involves interaction with co-workers who do not have disabilities. Integrated employment includes employment located in community businesses, self-employment, and ownership of micro-enterprises.

**Competitive Wage** means payment for work that is equivalent to the payment made to others performing similar work. Competitive work **does not** mean special minimum wage (sub-minimum wage). (Definition taken from the 2008 Wisconsin Managed Care and Employment Task Force Report.)

**As of 2011, only 8% of working-age participants (age 18-64) in Wisconsin's long-term care system had integrated employment.** Significant percentages of individuals in these programs say they want to work, but are not receiving necessary supports to find a job. Despite a tremendous state investment in long-term care, employment is not currently a priority in Wisconsin's system. However, several Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) have already shown that the goal of improving employment for individuals with disabilities is possible. By placing an emphasis on employment, these organizations have seen double to triple the employment rates in Wisconsin.

### Benefits

Increasing employment for people with disabilities benefit everyone. A Wisconsin initiative will:

- Create tax revenues from wages of previously unemployed individuals
- Generate income that increases purchases of goods and services in local communities (supplanting goods or services previously purchased with public dollars)
- Reduce dependence on government support:  
Ability One Economic Benefits Study by LMI Government Consulting (2009) showed for people with significant disabilities:
  - 93% in one group of the study eliminated use of food stamps and 100% eliminated welfare benefits
  - 45% overall eliminated their dependence on Medicaid

### Examples of Other States

Following are examples of how other states are using Employment First initiatives to prioritize employment throughout the state programs designed to support people with disabilities.

On April 19, 2012 Governor Chris Christie made New Jersey the 14th state to enact an Employment First initiative. On March 19, 2012 Ohio's Governor John Kasich signed an Executive Order outlining community employment as the priority and the preferred outcome for working-age Ohioans with disabilities.

### New Jersey

New Jersey's new Employment First initiative is protecting funding for Vocational Rehabilitation Services at the

enhanced level provided in the Fiscal Year 2012 Budget, so that providers have the resources necessary to offer increased work activities for a second year. If Wisconsin moved forward in using DHS 20% match to DVR to draw down more federal funds, we could also hire more counselors and improve training and outreach, resulting in better outcomes.

New Jersey also is continuing WorkAbility, a Medicaid Buy-In Program offering full health coverage to people with disabilities who are working, and whose earnings would otherwise make them ineligible for Medicaid. Currently, there are more than 9,200 participants in NJ WorkAbility. [Wisconsin's Medical Assistance Purchase Plan (MAPP) also allows people to earn more and retain higher asset levels without fear of losing their healthcare coverage or long-term care services. In October there were 19,530 MAPP participants statewide.]

The New Jersey initiative also allows the state to contract with supportive employment agencies that are community based, not segregated within a facility, through the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Since January 2012, 900 individuals have obtained competitive employment.

### **Utah**

Utah's Employment First law, passed in February 2011, requires the Dept. of Workforce Services, Utah State Office of Rehabilitation, and Division of Services for People with Disabilities to give priority to providing services that assist the person in obtaining and keeping meaningful employment. All three agencies must develop a written plan to implement policy and set annual goals to increase employment numbers.

### **Pennsylvania**

Pennsylvania's Employment First law, passed in December 2005, redirects resources from traditional adult day services to community-integrated employment. It also standardizes access to information on employment options and the opportunity to consider competitive employment as part of the individualized supports planning/budgeting process. Their law provides targeted funding for training and technical assistance on youth transition that emphasizes supporting youth in employment.

### **Kansas**

Kansas' Governor issued an Executive Order, passed in the Legislature in 2010, which states "competitive and integrated employment of persons with disabilities... shall be the first priority in the state and that public and private employers shall participate in the effort." The law authorizes all state agencies to adopt rules and regulations to support "Employment First" and establishes an oversight commission to ensure implementation.

### **California**

California's Legislature passed a law enacted in July 2010 saying "Work leads to health and well-being - self-esteem, confidence, and more income...increased social networks and making contributions to the greater community like paying taxes and having more buying power." The law included the formation of an Employment First Commission to develop policy and identify roles of state and local agencies to enhance integrated employment. The Commission also recommends legislative, regulatory, and policy changes to increase the number of people with significant disabilities in integrated employment.

### **Arkansas**

Arkansas' Governor issued an Executive Order in October 2010 stating, "Arkansans with disabilities who wish to work and become more self-sufficient should be supported and encouraged by state government agencies to find employment in the competitive job market." The order creates a task force to develop staff training, identify state barriers, and identify baseline employment data. State agencies, whose missions include service to individuals with disabilities, will develop and implement Employment First policies and procedures.

### **Conclusion**

An Executive Order declaring Wisconsin as an "Employment First" state would prioritize competitive employment across all systems that currently support people with disabilities in the state.