



Who are the people impacted by this issue?

Wisconsin's Employment First law establishes community integrated employment (CIE) - typical employment at a community job at regular wage - as a priority for people with disabilities. The number of working-age people with disabilities who are employed has decreased significantly during the pandemic, a 17% reduction as of May. A year ago, in 2019, 19% of working-aged people with a disability were employed, compared to 66% for people without a disability. Among people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Wisconsin's Long-term care system (Family Care/IRIS) only 16% are working in competitive-wage jobs, while 55% who are not working say they want a paid job. Nationally, studies consistently show that managers positively view people with disabilities, regarding them as easy to supervise and producing as much work, or more than co-workers without disabilities.

Why is this issue important?

When people with disabilities work, they reduce reliance on public benefits and report better mental and physical health. The turnover rate for employees with disabilities is 8% compared to 45% for other workers; 87% of customers say they prefer companies that hire people with disabilities.

Wisconsin is having success in getting people with disabilities to work, but there is more to be done. Project SEARCH trains students with significant disabilities for a variety of jobs and has a nearly 90% employment success rate. The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) is serving more clients than ever before. Wisconsin PROMISE demonstrated successful strategies for moving youth with disabilities and their families from reliance on public benefits to work and increased economic independence. Still, many people with disabilities who want to work are being left behind. Currently, working-age adults in Wisconsin's long-term care system are still only employed at levels of 4% to 10%, and COVID-19 has further eroded those numbers. Many people with disabilities say they want to work in the community but are not connected to employment supports.

How are supports for this issue funded?

People with disabilities use a variety of supports and funding to seek and maintain employment. Youth in transition are entitled to transition supports through their school until age 21. This may include job training, internships, job exploration, job coaching and more. Some youth and adults may also be eligible for the state's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) program. DVR is a federal/state program designed to obtain, maintain, and advance employment. Funding for the program is primarily provided by a federal vocational rehabilitation grant (78.7%) with state matching funds (21.3%). Adults who meet eligibility for the state's long-term care programs (they must meet financial and functional requirements) may use employment supports through programs like Family Care, IRIS and Family Care Partnership. People enrolled in county mental health programs may use Community Recovery Services. CRS helps individuals living with a mental illness reach their full potential, including employment. Currently CRS is only available in 15 counties.



EMPLOYMENT

What are major concerns related to this issue?

In 2018 Wisconsin Medicaid long-term support waivers served approximately 43,000 working age individuals, yet only 3,873 were employed in Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE).

Some WI facility-based providers already are shifting their business models towards community integrated employment supports to respond to families and people with disabilities who want work in the community with positive results. Employment service providers need short term funding to continue this transformation. Survival Coalition supports a one-time competitive grant fund to get more people to work.

Long-term care programs do not yet prioritize employment on plans for working age people and providers are not reimbursed appropriately for the work it takes to secure employment. Survival Coalition recommends that DHS implement a tiered rate system across long-term care programs that takes into consideration a person's individual employment support needs, unique situations resulting from COVID-19, and prioritizes competitive integrated employment.

People with disabilities want to save their earnings without fear of losing their eligibility for the healthcare they need. ABLE accounts are tax free savings accounts that many states are taking advantage of. Wisconsin does not have an ABLE program and the state has done little to help people sign up for accounts.

Transportation is a major barrier to work as public transit routes have been cut and rural areas have limited options. Employers and communities should be supported to develop transportation solutions that help people with disabilities connect with jobs in their communities.

People with mental health needs require specialized supports to be successful in employment, which can be a key part of recovery. Currently these type of supports are not available statewide.

Wisconsin should be a model employer of people with disabilities – making changes and accommodations to positions and hiring practices that ensure state government reflects the state's population of people with disabilities.

How has this issue been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Just like the rest of Wisconsin, many people with disabilities are out of work due to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the employment rate for people with disabilities has continued to lag and getting people back to work is bound to be difficult. Employment services providers have gone months without payments and the lack of revenue threatens to put many out of business, further reducing options for people with disabilities.

