

Having a job is a key part of being connected to the community. For people of all abilities, employment brings a sense of purpose and meaning, a way to support themselves, and the flexibility to pursue one's dream.

Yet, based on 2016-2017 data from the National Core Indicators Project, only about 20 percent of people with intellectual and developmental

disabilities who receive services from a state I/DD agency are employed in community jobs, and only 12 to 14 percent of individuals work in individual integrated jobs (competitive integrated employment).¹ That means those without disabilities are employed at three times the rate as those with disabilities, despite people with I/DD demonstrating their strengths as members of the workforce.

» THE CHALLENGE

In 2014, the Special Olympics commissioned a Gallup survey on employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities, although the findings are similar for those with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Here are the key findings:

- » Nationally, **34% of people with intellectual disabilities are employed.**
- » Of employed people with intellectual disabilities, **53% are employed competitively** (i.e., they work alongside people without disabilities at a market-driven wage), **38% are employed in a sheltered workshop** (i.e., work centers specifically for people with disabilities), and 9% are employed in other settings (e.g., self-employed).
- » Of those competitively employed, **28% work in customer service, 17% in retail, 16% in food service, 9% in office settings, 8% in manufacturing, and 22% in other sectors such as childcare and landscaping.**
- » Of the adults with intellectual disabilities employed in a competitive setting, **over half (62%) have been at their jobs for three or more years.**
- » Only **26% of employed adults with intellectual disabilities have full-time jobs.**
- » Only a **third of employed adults with intellectual disabilities were offered health insurance** by their employer.²

» THE OPPORTUNITY

There are many positive impacts of competitive employment:

MORE PAY.

Competitive employment saw a **31 percent increase in hourly wages** (in real terms) since the 1980s, while there was a 41 percent decrease in hourly wages for those in sheltered workshops during the same period.³

MORE FRIENDS

Work supports socialization that leads to more and longer-lasting interpersonal relationships.

MORE HAPPINESS

Work increases an individual's self-worth and provides them resources that allow them to contribute to and participate in the community.⁴

HIGHER RETURN ON TAXPAYERS' INVESTMENTS

Every dollar spent on supported employment services yields a return of \$1.46, based on sales and income taxes alone generated by the individual working. Simply put, **supported employment is good fiscal policy, resulting in a 46 percent return on investment.**⁵

» INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

In 2006, the state of Washington showed in a big way that policy interventions can ensure that working age adults with I/DD do not have to settle for unemployment. On July 1, 2006, Washington was one of the first states to adopt a policy that set employment as the sole focus of meaningful day services, in what became the Employment First policy.

The most current version of this policy:⁶

- Establishes employment support as the first use of employment and day program funds targeted toward for working-age adults and ensures that after nine months of receiving employment services individuals may choose community access programs.
- Applies to all eligible working-age adults who receive or seek employment and day program services from all state, county and contracted providers.

Linda Rolfe, Washington's Division of Developmental Disabilities director at the time, best summarized the value of Employment First:

*"In Washington, we believe that employment is the easiest, most cost-effective strategy available to us to ensure that people have opportunities to experience the benefits we value. We have focused a lot of energy on getting people opportunities to have real jobs with good wages."*⁷

The state's approach for individuals with I/DD was to focus on employment first. The focus ultimately was for adults with I/DD entering the system to focus their first nine months on finding a job. Over time and with encouragement from legislative and advocacy groups, the nine-month timeframe was set because it paralleled the employment search of people without disabilities, the vast majority of whom found a job within nine months of leaving school. Leaders and advocates also recognized that employment is a complex and challenging goal to achieve and that the more focused, collaborative and targeted the effort is, the more likely individuals are to achieve their goals of meaningful competitive employment. And, knowing this, they also recognized that employment is a typical part of a full life for any adult in Washington State, including citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Therefore, legislation, policies and practices should be aligned to support the employment goals and outcomes of each individual.

The impact of the Washington's Employment First policy was profound. The number of individuals working for pay rose to 4,200 in May 2018 from 2,322 in 2007, according to state data. This 81 percent increase in just over a decade was particularly impressive given it occurred during the Great Recession (2008 to 2011), which started just after the passage of the Employment First policy. Even more impressive is that in 2015 (the year in which data for this measure is available for all states), Washington had the highest rate in the country of individuals with I/DD participating in competitive employment; at 85 percent, Washington's success rate is more than four times the national average (19 percent).

» HOW OTHER STATES CAN FOLLOW WASHINGTON'S LEAD

Washington and its community-based partners “invested [their] advocacy and development effort into continually building and investing in a community system that can support the needs of everyone, one person at a time,” as Cesilee Coulson, executive director of the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment, explained.⁸ With all the talk of self-directed services, Ms. Coulson knows, “True choice happens after someone with disabilities gets a paycheck. The government can only provide you limited choices that are part of a service mix; your own paycheck and employment give you independence.”

There were five keys to Washington’s Employment First success: (1) state and county leadership, (2) training and innovation, (3) quality employment agencies, (4) organized and informed families, and (5) clearly defined goals. In addition, training and development efforts focused on building a “community of practice” based on best practices from throughout the state and the rest of the country. As Mike Hatzenbeler, CEO of Seattle-based UCP affiliate PROVAIL, notes, “The Community of Practice is critical as there are many hard and big barriers to get to full inclusion. It is vital that everyone have a strong belief that this is not just a pipe dream but a real possibility.” Hatzenbeler credits strong, focused leadership over the long term within the Administration for the successful achievement of the Employment First goals.

To help achieve competitive employment for very complex clients, agencies established the Cross County Collaboration. Each participating agency, including PROVAIL, identifies their five most challenging clients struggling to achieve the employment goal. All three agencies focused on these 15 individuals, providing intensive support and creating a broader network of employers and community partners. On average, 265 hours of service from intake through job stabilization are devoted to each individual. Over 18 months, 14 of the 15 clients (93 percent) found jobs and retained them.⁹

Several innovative strategies were used to focus legislators on the power of Employment First:

CELEBRATE

Establish employment for All Day, organized by the Community Employment Alliance.

ARTICULATE

Develop a winning slogan, such as “Everyone Deserves a Payday.”

ADVOCATE

Urge your governor to issue a proclamation establishing “Employment for All” Day.

EDUCATE

Distribute Payday candy bars to legislators with key facts and talking points.

With all the competing policy priorities facing legislators, advocates' savvy strategies and inspiring outcomes are keys to sustaining and expanding Employment First success.

Today, 32 states have adopted Employment First policy in legislation or by executive action, with almost all states having Employment First initiatives.¹¹

In May 2018, just 58 percent of individuals with intellectual disabilities were working for pay in integrated jobs and individual competitive integrated employment. If every state matched Washington State's success of 85 percent of individuals with I/DD receiving services that support integrated employment, there would be 250,000 more individuals with I/DD (up from just 124,000 today) working today.

Despite the fact that Employment First policies exist in 32 states, competitive unemployment rates remain low across the board, suggesting that policy on its own is not enough. In addition, states need to ensure that innovative practices and investments in I/DD supports are coupled with public policy to ensure that people of all abilities have the opportunity to engage in meaningful employment opportunities.

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