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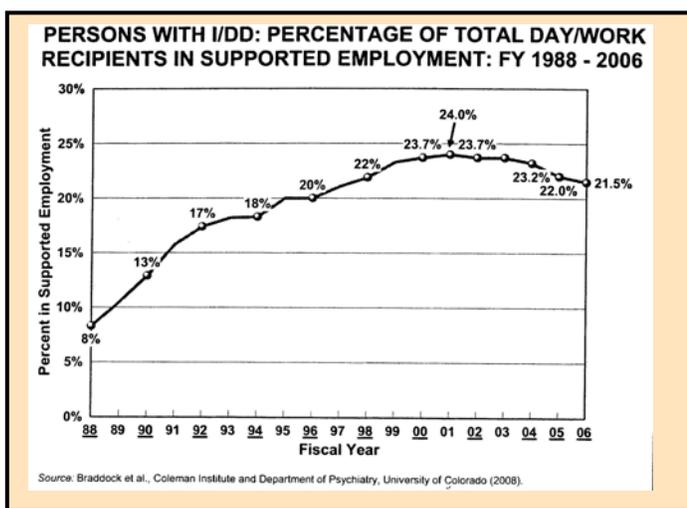
National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services

Workers First

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What Does Work Mean? Several years ago I interviewed a number of workers with serious intellectual disabilities who held regular jobs in a variety of local businesses including a fast food restaurant, a library, a hotel kitchen, a bottle recycling plant and other businesses. All were being paid at least the minimum wage. What did work mean? The men and women that I interviewed described their jobs and their lives, hopes and dreams in the same ways that most people do. Although each person's perspective differed, employment was important to them because of the purpose and organization that the work gave to their lives, the opportunities that it offered for friendships and both on and off the job, and because it provided the means for them to buy things for themselves and their families. What they talked about the most, however, was the feeling that the job gave them, a feeling of membership and companionship with their co-workers. Walt, who worked in the library put it this way, "I like being with the books and being upstairs here. ...[but] the best part is working with the people I know." Workers identified with the tasks they performed, the companies that employed them and the friendships they had with their colleagues on the job. They described themselves as being "workers first," just like everyone else, and referred to their previous experiences in the workshop and day programs as being just a "trainee," a "participant" or a "client."

Work Matters. Employment has always been on the service agenda for state developmental disabilities agencies. But the focus on improving the numbers of individuals with ID/DD working in integrated jobs in the community as a priority policy goal has varied over time and across states. State DD agency policymakers have noted with concern that although the actual numbers of people with developmental disabilities in integrated community jobs increased slightly over the past several years, the percentage of individuals served in state DD systems who are employed in regular community



jobs actually fell during the same period from its peak of 24% in 2001 to 21.5% in 2006. Equally disturbing are data suggesting that the focus of service provision has, in many regions, shifted away from employment and job supports to segregated day activity and workshop programs that do not assist participants in accessing a productive career path and meaningful work in the community.

Employment First. In an effort to reverse this trend, several forward thinking state developmental disabilities agencies are implementing comprehensive “Employment First” policies to focus funding and service delivery on improving employment outcomes among individuals with DD receiving support. Employment First strategies consist of a clear set of guiding principles and practices promulgated through state statute, regulation, and operational procedures that target employment in typical work settings as the priority for state funding and the purpose of supports furnished to persons with developmental disabilities during the day. Employment First policies anchor the service delivery system, focusing funding, resource allocation, training, daily assistance, and even the provision of residential supports on the overall objective of employment, strengthening the capacity of all individuals receiving publicly financed supports to enter the workforce and become contributing members of society.

Each individual will be supported to pursue his or her own unique path to work, a career, or his or her contribution to/participation in community life. All individuals, regardless of the challenge of their disability, will be afforded an opportunity to pursue competitive employment.

- Washington State - Working Age Adult Policy

Washington State’s Working Age Adult Policy identifies employment as the only day service that will be supported by the state developmental disabilities agency. Although the policy does not exclude funding for sheltered employment and other services emphasizing community participation, support is contingent upon each person being on a path to

employment and that services be designed to enable people to reach their individual employment goals. Other states, following Washington’s lead, are crafting Employment First strategies to ensure that persons with the most intensive disabilities are not excluded from needed services during the day.

Making it Happen. State Employment First policies target a wide range of operational practices, funding methodologies and training procedures that are designed to increase the number of individuals with developmental disabilities who are employed in integrated community jobs. A recent review of state Employment First practices was performed by the State Employment Leadership Network, a multi-state technical assistance collaborative led by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the Institute on Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Policies adopted or under consideration by states include key provisions that:

- Identify integrated employment as the primary service option for adults receiving Day Habilitation Services and Supports (CO).

- Require integrated employment to be addressed in each recipient’s Individual Service Plan (CO).
- Set performance goals identifying specific increases in the percentage of individuals with developmental disabilities working in integrated employment within a designated time frame (FL, AZ).
- Establish standards identifying full time employment as the optimal outcome of day service delivery (OK).
- Establish regulatory provisions ensuring that persons with mental retardation have full access to employment and the training necessary to sustain employment (PA).
- Identify employment as the first day service that should be explored (TN).
- Include regulations ensuring choice and assistance to help people find and change jobs (TN).
- Require that services support a job for everyone who wants one (TN).
- Set gainful employment in integrated community settings as the primary service option for working age adults and require steps to be taken toward integrated employment for those individuals not currently working in such settings (WA).
- Require special authorization to receive funding for non-employment service options (WA).

Employment is the first day service option that should be explored for adults in the Division of Mental Retardation Services, Medicaid or state funded supports. Employment will always be considered as the appropriate outcome for an adult. Employment services and supports are viewed as the most appropriate service unless there is a compelling reason for recommending another service.

Tennessee Division of Mental Retardation Services

Employment First policies represent a significant step in states’ efforts to improve integrated employment outcomes for persons with developmental disabilities receiving publicly financed support. Employment First represents a commitment by states, and state developmental disabilities agencies, to the propositions that all individuals with developmental disabilities: (a) are capable of performing meaningful work in typical integrated employment settings; (b) should receive as a matter of state policy employment related services and supports as a priority over other non-work related day services, and (c) should be paid at minimum or prevailing wage rates.

Employment is important in everyone’s lives. For persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities having a regular job in a local company, store or business means membership in the community and is the critical element to people “having a life.”

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