

Employment

EMPLOYMENT

People with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) can be employed in the community alongside people without disabilities and earn competitive wages. They should be supported to make informed choices about their work and careers and have the resources to seek, obtain, and be successful in community employment.

ISSUE

Historically, the majority of people with IDD have been either unemployed or underemployed despite their ability, desire, and willingness to work in the community. Many have been placed in “prevocational” programs and “disability-only” workshops where they are paid below minimum wage and have little expectation of moving into jobs where they work alongside people without disabilities.

People often leave school with little community-based vocational experience or planning for transition from school to work or post-secondary education. Adult service agencies have struggled to move people into the workforce using personnel who often do not have proper training in best practices for either finding or supporting people in jobs. When employed, few people have opportunities to advance, explore new possibilities, or, in their later years, retire.

Barriers to employment include, first and foremost, low societal expectations that foster job discrimination. In addition, unrealistically low limits on assets and earnings make people fear losing vital public benefits if they work too many hours or earn too much. Systemically, public resources fund service hours rather than outcomes and are often neither sufficient nor flexible enough to allow collaboration and blending of employment funding streams. Lack of other services like transportation or of accommodations like assistive technology can also hinder success.

POSITION

People with IDD should have the supports necessary from individuals and systems to enable them to find and keep community jobs based on their preferences, interests, and strengths, work alongside people without disabilities, receive comparable wages, and be free from workplace discrimination. Requirements related to employment include:

- Opportunities for post-secondary education, including college and vocational training, to gain knowledge and skills to allow people to get better jobs.
- Ongoing planning to promote job advancement and career development.
- Fair and reasonable wages and benefits.
- Opportunities for self-employment and business ownership.

- Opportunities to work with and, in the case of people with IDD who own small businesses, employ people without disabilities.
- The ability to explore new directions over time and, at the appropriate time, retire.
- Opportunities to work and increase earnings and assets without losing eligibility for needed public benefits.

Best Practices

- Employment supports and services should use best practices, including assessing skills and interests, working with employers, matching jobs to skill sets and employer needs, providing individualized and ongoing job supports, designing reasonable job accommodations, integrating people into the workforce, building social skills necessary in the workplace, and securing necessary ancillary services such as transportation.
- People with IDD must have training and information on how to access supports needed to find and keep jobs.

School-to-Work Transition

- Transition planning should start early.
- Transition activities should foster individualized exploration of and experiences with community-based employment options that enable youth to make informed choices.
- Transition activities should include career assessments to identify students' interests and preferences, exposure to post-secondary education and career opportunities, training to develop job-seeking and workplace skills, and participation in multiple on-the-job activities and experiences in paid and unpaid settings. Transition activities should not be limited to unpaid internships at pre-set community worksites.
- Students should leave high school with opportunities to pursue post-secondary education and/or with an appropriate job or an action plan for finding one.

Training of Staff and People with IDD

- Staff of employment and school-to-work transition programs must receive training in best practices to help people find and keep jobs.
- Along with ensuring appropriate on-the-job training, people with IDD should receive guidance, if needed, in acquiring the social skills necessary in the workplace.

- People with IDD must have training, including, if desired, driver's education, to allow them to travel in the community so they can get to jobs and enhance their independence.

Systems

For all people with IDD, publicly funded employment programs should first explore employment alongside people without disabilities at comparable wages, with comparable benefits, before considering other options in the community. Ancillary services like transportation and accommodations like assistive technology must be available to individuals and support agencies. Public policy should encourage employers to hire people with IDD.

Publicly funded employment programs should also:

- Be available to all people with IDD who wish to explore opportunities to work, regardless of the nature and extent of their disabilities.
- Enable people to make informed choices by providing individualized exploration of and experiences with community-based employment and by presenting all information needed to make informed choices in an understandable way.
- Provide sufficient resources to support people to work in the community and be flexible enough to foster collaboration and braiding of employment-related funds.
- Build infrastructure and supports needed to phase out the issuance of subminimum wage certificates, increase opportunities for competitive integrated employment, and put in place safeguards to protect the interests of any people affected by this shift.
- Measure and publicly report on outcomes on an ongoing basis.

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