



Governor Terry E. Branstad

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## Employment 1st for Whom?

Over the last several years, considerable efforts have been made to move Iowa toward a disability service system with policies, funding, and practice that align with **Employment 1<sup>st</sup>**, a framework that is centered on the premise that **all** citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment. Collaborative disability/employment efforts in Iowa have resulted in a shared commitment establishing that integrated employment is Iowa's first and preferred outcome for people with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities. However, even though the state has made progress, thousands of Iowans remain employed in segregated settings earning far less than the minimum wage, dependent on public benefits, and likely unaware of the resources and services available to support them with moving into competitive integrated employment. The primary intention of Employment 1<sup>st</sup> is focused on how **every** Iowan deserves the chance to explore competitive integrated employment.

So why is there such a significant number of Iowans who remain in segregated environments making subminimum wage? Funding and staff capacity concerns, fear of diminished successful outcomes, and resistance to doing more than the minimum requirements under the law have led to passing responsibility onto others. We can no longer let those fears be excuses. Schools, parents, state agencies, and community-based organizations must make individuals with disabilities working at subminimum wage a priority for competitive integrated employment. No single agency alone can invoke a shift from sheltered employment to community employment for all Iowans. We must work together so all can work.

With the leadership of the Employment 1<sup>st</sup> initiative, the mandates under Section 511 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and the dedication of passionate advocates, we have the opportunity to make a difference through work that has a real impact on the lives of Iowans. If we do not take an interest in supporting Iowans employed at subminimum wage, we are neglecting an entire population of people and in doing so, we are neglecting their rights, we are setting them up to spend their lives in poverty, and we are supporting the belief that they are not capable of working in the community and earning a living wage.

Every professional serving people with disabilities has a responsibility and a valuable role to assist individuals who have perhaps not been given a chance to explore competitive integrated employment, a right many of us have not had to fight for. The motto of the state of Iowa is, "Our Liberties We Prize and Our Rights We Will Maintain". For Iowans with disabilities, this includes the liberties that come with having a job, and equal rights to real work for real pay<sup>1</sup>.

1. "Employment First: Iowa", *Lead Center*, accessed July 14, 2016, <http://employmentfirst.leadcenter.org/iowa>

## **Working Together So All Can Work**

### **Schools:**

- Expectations: set the expectation that every student is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Ensure that students with disabilities are not entering into segregated employment. The law requires that they first receive Pre-Employment Transition Services.
- Provide career exploration and have discussions with students and families about the resources available to support them in competitive integrated employment.
- Assist students with obtaining paid work experiences while in high school. Studies have shown that students who have two paid work experiences before graduation are far more successful in finding employment after high school.

### **Case Managers:**

- Expectations: set the expectation that every individual with a disability is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Provide information and have discussions about resources so individuals can make informed choices.
- Always refer to services in community settings that will lead to competitive integrated employment opportunities first.
- Make in-person connections between the individuals you serve and vocational rehabilitation counselors to facilitate referrals for employment services.

### **Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRP's):**

- Expectations: set the expectation that every individual with a disability is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Collaborate with the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies (IVRS & IDB) as well as other entities providing outreach to individuals in segregated employment. Making referrals to VR may result in increased funding for services you provide.
- Do not employ individuals at subminimum wage unless they provide the required documentation showing that they have received the services required by law.

### **VR Agencies:**

- Expectations: set the expectation that every individual with a disability is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Collaborate with CRP's to provide outreach, information and referral, and career counseling to individuals working in segregated settings.
- Emphasize counselors' roles in business development which create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to work in the community; changing employer attitudes is critical.
- Do not close individuals in extended employment.

### **Parents/Families:**

- Expectations: set the expectation early on that your son/daughter is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Have discussions about employment with your son/daughter.
- Encourage and explore integrated activities including social, recreational, and leisure.
- Educate yourself and become a strong advocate so you can help your son/daughter make informed choices about employment.

### **Community-Based Organizations:**

- Expectations: set the expectation that every individual with a disability is capable of competitive integrated employment.
- Be willing to partner and collaborate: we all have to take responsibility even if it is not the primary focus of our work; it needs to be a priority.
- When working with individuals in segregated settings, inform them of services, such as VR, which can help them move into competitive integrated employment.

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