

# Policy and State-level Strategies to Promote Employment

## Introduction

At the national level, integrated employment has become an important policy priority. Greater expectations are being placed on those charged with delivering employment supports, and disability systems are responding. However, the promise of integrated employment has yet to be realized for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The number of individuals supported in integrated employment by state IDD agencies has remained the same since 2000, participation in non-work services has grown rapidly, and promising practices for employment supports identified in the research are not widely implemented<sup>1</sup>. What are the state-level strategies that can change this trajectory?

## Employment as a national priority

In recent years, the IDD and broader disability advocacy community is mobilizing around an Employment First vision. This embraces the notion that anyone who wants to work can work, with the right supports and job match, regardless of the severity of their disability.

The Department of Labor and federal offices that serve people with disabilities are working together to promote Employment First policies<sup>2</sup>. As of June 2014, upwards of 44 states had some type of Employment First initiative, policy, or grassroots effort<sup>3</sup>. The introduction of Employment First policies has been an important step toward helping people with disabilities participate fully in society, move out of poverty, and become self-sufficient<sup>4</sup>.

Other evidence at the federal level demonstrates that shifts are occurring:

- » The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services released guidance to the field clarifying their commitment to individual integrated employment as an outcome of employment-related services under the Home and Community-Based Services waiver program and has released new rules related to the assessment of community-based employment settings (Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2014).
- » In July 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) required that each state's public vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency focus on transition services and pre-employment services, coordinate with the state agency responsible for administering the state Medicaid plan and with state IDD agencies, and focus on the general workforce development system and One-Stop Career Centers (also called American Job Centers).
- » In multiple states, the U.S. Department of Justice has extended the *Olmstead vs. L.C.* decision related to the unnecessary segregation of people.

## This brief:

- » Describes the national landscape regarding employment policy and outcomes for people with IDD
- » Introduces a new line of research that considers state employment systems' policies and practices and their relationship to individual outcomes; and defines policies and practices of high-performing state employment systems.

## What is the RRTC on Advancing Employment?

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducts research on state-level policy and practice around integrated employment. In 2014, ICI received a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), to develop the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Advancing Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The purpose of this research is to identify strategies to support state agencies, providers, advocates, individuals and families to make the philosophy of Employment First a reality.

RRTC on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

A project of

**ThinkWork!**

at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston



Yet, history has shown that policy alone does not enable states to help people with disabilities attain the best possible outcomes. The data tells a bleak story. The unemployment rate among people with disabilities remains very high, and is especially significant for people with IDD. From 2012 to 2013, only 14.7% of adults supported by state IDD agencies were working in integrated employment<sup>5</sup>. What specific actions and measures are needed at the state level to ensure greater access to integrated employment for people with IDD?

## How will this project promote policy shifts that result in increased employment outcomes?

Through the work of the RRTC, we consider the practices, needs, and goals of state employment systems. This project explores how state agencies and their partners are working to implement Employment First policies that enable people with IDD to attain integrated employment.

Building on ICI's foundation of work on state systems and employment, project staff and partners:

- » Analyze data from the U.S. Census Survey, RSA-911 (VR data), the National Core Indicator Survey, and service data from the IDD system to identify the characteristics shared across systems by higher-performing states.
- » Explore how state agencies and their partners work together to achieve optimal employment outcomes for individuals with IDD.
- » Provide policy analysis papers that look at the connection between state systems and federal-level agencies and programs, and how state agencies are responding to a changing national landscape.

## What's the goal?

- » This research explores the relationships between state policies and practices and employment outcomes, with a goal to produce a framework where systems intentionally align practices with a priority for employment.

## How will we get there?

- » Secondary analysis of national data sets
- » Case studies of higher-performing state systems
- » Policy analyses that describe challenges and strategies of states as they respond to national priorities

## Our research questions:

- » What are the characteristics of employment systems, services, and supports provided by higher-performing states? What are the ways in which system components complement one another? How do these characteristics differ from states that do not perform as well?
- » What is the relationship between state employment system characteristics and employment outcomes for individuals with IDD?
- » How do efforts such as Employment First policies, participation in national systems change efforts, and other contextual factors relate to employment services and outcomes within states?

## What's next?

This year, we will work with our partners from Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered to write a plain-language summary of policy changes at the national level that affect integrated employment. We will also look across multiple data sets and finalize a composite indicator, or ranking method, to understand which states have relatively high performance across different systems that support people with IDD. Through this initial ranking system, we will identify higher-performing states and conduct case study research to understand the factors and strategies that enable successful cross-system collaborations.

We will produce journal articles, briefs, and policy analysis summaries. These products of our research will shed light on the efforts of states to promote systems change that results in greater access to gainful employment for people with IDD.

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> Domin & Butterworth, 2013; Butterworth et al., 2015a; Migliore et al., 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.
- <sup>3</sup> APSE, 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> Butterworth et al., 2015b.
- <sup>5</sup> Bradley et al., 2015.

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# ThinkWork!

Advancing employment and opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities



Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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### For more information:

Allison Hall | [allison.hall@umb.edu](mailto:allison.hall@umb.edu)  
Senior Research Associate | Institute for Community Inclusion

[www.ThinkWork.org/rrtc](http://www.ThinkWork.org/rrtc)