

# Advancing New Jersey's Employment First Practices and Policies

## Executive Summary and Advocacy Action Plan

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# Executive Summary

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In 2012, New Jersey became an Employment First state to “proactively promote competitive employment in the general workforce for people with any type of disability” (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2012), thereby “joining the national movement to deliver meaningful employment, competitive wages, and career ladder opportunities for people with disabilities” (New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities [NJCDD], 2019). This initial announcement was followed by a policy statement further defining Employment First in New Jersey: “Competitive employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred post education outcome for people with any type of disability” (New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities, n.d.).

In spite of this policy shift toward Employment First almost a decade ago, the mainstream labor force participation rate for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in New Jersey has not significantly increased and continues to lag behind national trends. To address this issue, in March 2021, NJCDD contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey to evaluate New Jersey's Employment First policies and practices, and develop recommendations and an advocacy plan to increase meaningful competitive employment for people with I/DD in New Jersey. This work was done in partnership with the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The goal was to better understand the strengths, challenges, and opportunities New Jersey faces in implementing its Employment First policy and to identify strategies to support more New Jersey residents with I/DD to succeed in integrated employment.

This report contains the executive summary of this effort and an advocacy plan for implementation. A more comprehensive report is available, with detailed recommendations, resource links, and background on the New Jersey system of employment supports for individuals with I/DD.

## Employment First: Strengths to Build On

New Jersey has numerous strengths to build on in terms of advancing employment for individuals with I/DD. These include:

- ▶ **Efforts by public agencies:** Both the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS), as major funders of employment services for individuals with I/DD, have undertaken a series of policy changes over the past several years to advance employment of individuals with I/DD.
- ▶ **Support by legislature:** The state legislature has expressed increasing and ongoing support for integrated employment, as evidenced by numerous pieces of proposed and recently passed legislation.
- ▶ **Support by business community:** The business community, led by the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, has expressed strong support for employment of individuals with I/DD, including development of a series of action items.
- ▶ **Advocacy:** New Jersey's Developmental Disabilities Advocacy Network (DDAN), the New Jersey Association of People Supporting Employment First, and other organizations have increasingly been advocating for policy and practice changes to advance Employment First.
- ▶ **Federal picture:** The federal government, through actions by Congress and federal agencies, has placed increased emphasis over the past decade on integrated employment, while encouraging the reduction in use of facility-based services (such as sheltered workshops). This federal landscape provides opportunities for New Jersey to leverage in increasing integrated employment.

## Employment First in New Jersey: The Challenges

**New Jersey is behind national trends:** While the overall rate nationally of workforce participation by individuals with I/DD is a challenge, New Jersey lags significantly behind other states. Indicative of this is that DDD is the primary agency through which adults with I/DD receive funded services in New Jersey. According to the latest available data, this represented almost 12,000 individuals in day and employment services, but less than 1,800 were either working or receiving services to assist them to become employed in the community (Source: National Survey of State Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Agencies' Employment and Day Services, [StateData.Info – www.statedata.info/statepages/New%20Jersey](http://www.statedata.info/statepages/New%20Jersey)).

**Individuals and families are unable to get the help they need:** Individuals with I/DD and their families report a huge sense of frustration in their ability to easily access the necessary assistance and supports from public agencies and service providers to become successfully employed.

**Policy doesn't translate into practice:** New Jersey has numerous policies that are highly supportive of integrated employment, including the Employment First policy. However, the reality in practice is quite different, as indicated by lack of progress, inability to access necessary services and supports, and often indifference or active discouragement by professionals in terms of pursuing employment in the community.

**Inconsistency in culture of support for integrated employment:** Underlying many of the issues and challenges that New Jersey faces is a lack of belief in the values of Employment First that are expressed in New Jersey's [Principles of Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(www.nj.gov/humanservices/ddd/documents/principles\\_of\\_employment.pdf\)](http://www.nj.gov/humanservices/ddd/documents/principles_of_employment.pdf). These core beliefs include:

- ▶ Competitive employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred post-education outcome for people with any type of disability.
- ▶ People are "ready" to work as soon as they express an interest in doing so.
- ▶ It is presumed that all people with disabilities can and should work.

**Systems are siloed:** Service systems and supports are highly siloed, and relationships and partnerships between public systems (DDD, DVRS, New Jersey Department of Education, etc.) need significant improvement. There are inconsistencies between systems, and major challenges in accessing funding and services across systems.

**Lack of consistent quality of service providers:** New Jersey's network of service providers is inconsistent in terms of its ability to provide quality assistance and supports that result in successful employment. While some of this is due to internal operational issues, a major challenge is the complex administrative structure imposed on service providers, extensive time spent negotiating with funding agencies over service authorizations, and insufficient funding.

**Lack of consistency in transition:** While New Jersey has pockets of excellence in terms of transition from school to employment, too often youth with I/DD leave school with little work experience, and are unprepared for the workplace as adults.

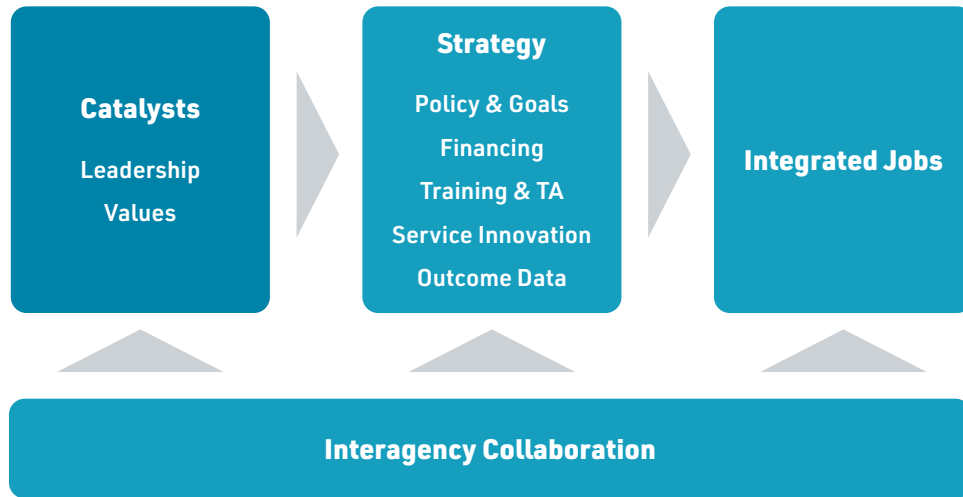
## Realizing the Vision of Employment First

In order for New Jersey to make significant improvements in employment of individuals with I/DD, a comprehensive and broad series of actions, and sustained effort over the long term, is needed. The following are key recommendations.

## Systems Change Framework

1. **Use a nationally recognized comprehensive framework for change:** True systems change requires a series of inter-related factors simultaneously. The *High-Performing States Framework* ([www.partnershipsinemployment.com/index.html%3Fpage\\_id=120.html](http://www.partnershipsinemployment.com/index.html%3Fpage_id=120.html)) from ICI (see Figure 1) provides a model for long-term sustained change, with leadership and values serving as catalysts for change, combined with strategies (policy and goals, financing, capacity development/training and technical assistance, outcome data, and service innovation), and supported by inter-agency collaboration.

Figure 1: High-Performing States Employment Framework



Hall et al. (2007)

## Leadership and Values

2. **Establish an Employment First commission:** New Jersey has never fully articulated its vision for Employment First, nor has it developed a well-defined road map, work plan, and assigned agency responsibilities to make it a reality. A primary recommendation of this report is the establishment of an Employment First commission, comprised of a broad range of stakeholders to oversee ongoing efforts to improve employment for individuals with I/DD.
3. **Strengthen employment advocacy, including engagement of self-advocates:** There is a need to increase grassroots advocacy for employment, including more strongly engaging individuals with I/DD in efforts to advance employment. This includes helping individuals to better understand their employment options and how they can be successful working in the community, and supporting self-advocates to be “at the table” and engaged in the decision-making processes for improving employment outcomes.

## Interagency Collaboration

4. **Break down the silos:** The public agencies that support individuals with I/DD must work together to break down the silos that too often result in the inability of individuals to get the assistance they need. This includes revising and updating Memoranda of Understanding, and working together to eliminate administrative hurdles for individuals in accessing services from multiple agencies.
5. **Create a customer-responsive system:** To address the confusion and lack of responsiveness often experienced by individuals and families seeking employment assistance and support, there is a need for a more customer-centered approach to service design and delivery.

## Policy and Goals

6. **Create a culture of informed choice:** While much lip service is paid to the concept of "informed choice," in practice many individuals with I/DD and their families are unaware of or don't understand the choices available to them in terms of employment, with decision-making deferred to others. Detailed policies need to be created, implemented, and monitored that ensure individuals have the necessary information, knowledge, skills, and experiences to make informed decisions regarding employment.
7. **Strengthen support for families:** There is a need to more strongly support families in efforts to advance employment, with a goal of having a system that does not require continuous involvement of families in order for individuals with I/DD to become successfully employed. This effort must include working with families who do not currently support integrated employment for their family member, to help them consider steps forward to consider employment possibilities.
8. **Improve support coordination:** DDD support coordination must be enhanced to ensure community employment options are fully considered and explored, within an atmosphere of presumption of employability.
9. **Increase access to DVRS services:** Increase the number of individuals with I/DD served by DVRS, through ensuring consistent application of policies, and staff development.
10. **Strengthen transition:** Students with I/DD leaving school prepared to go to work is a major component of advancing Employment First over the long term. School districts in New Jersey need to create an expectation of employment and careers for youth with I/DD, which includes gaining work experience while in school, with the state providing supports through both policies and resources.
11. **Address extended employment and subminimum wage:** Ensure that individuals currently in extended employment (sheltered work) and earning subminimum wage have every opportunity to consider and succeed in integrated employment paying minimum wage or better.
12. **Strengthen administrative support for service providers:** Streamline the administrative processes for employment service providers, to reduce the need to continuously negotiate authorization for services, and cumbersome billing.

## Financing

13. **Rebalance funding:** Analyze current use of funds for day and employment services, and determine how funding can be shifted and increased over time to prioritize employment in the community.
14. **Revise current rate structure for employment services:** Reimbursement rates need to be addressed, as current rates result in service providers operating employment services at a loss.

## Capacity Development: Training and Technical Assistance

15. **Enhance training and technical assistance:** Enhance existing training and technical assistance for service providers to improve service quality, diversity of employment opportunities, and ensure alignment with national best practices, including greater availability of customized employment services. In addition, support service providers to undertake innovations to help address staff shortages.
16. **Develop a comprehensive communications strategy:** While New Jersey has created some informational materials in support of Employment First, they are scattered and insufficient. A comprehensive communications strategy is needed, including a website that provides centralized access to the full range of policy and practice documents, and user-friendly guides and resources for individuals, families, and others.

## Outcome Data

17. **Strengthen data tracking and transparency:** New Jersey needs to examine its current data system regarding employment of individuals with I/DD, to ensure that progress is fully and properly tracked, and that there is transparency regarding availability of data.

## Service Innovation

18. **Address benefits preservation:** Concerns over the negative impact of income on eligibility for vital public benefits is a major barrier to employment. Steps need to be taken that increase the ready availability of assistance in managing benefits, combined with shifting the messaging on benefits to one that is "pro-employment". This includes increasing the use of the online tool **Disability Benefits 101** (<https://nj.db101.org>).
19. **Address transportation challenges:** Transportation for employment is a major challenge. It is recommended that: (a) stronger linkages be made with transportation officials at local, state, and regional levels; (b) knowledge of transportation issues be incorporated into required staff competencies; and (c) youth and adults with I/DD be given tools and training to understand their transportation options.
20. **Meet the needs of underserved communities:** Individuals with I/DD in diverse communities may lack access to necessary services and supports regarding employment, either because of a lack of availability, or the services do not reflect their cultural needs. As part of overall efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, steps must be undertaken to build employment services and supports within these underserved communities. Similarly, rural and urban areas often lack service options, and efforts must be made to expand availability of services in these areas.
21. **Pursue innovative practices:** New Jersey should consider an array of innovative practices to expand employment of individuals with I/DD, including greater use of the general workforce development system, increased use of technology, supporting individuals to participate in career pathway efforts (career and technical education, apprenticeships, etc.), and increased employment in the public sector.

There are a variety of changes in policies and practices in New Jersey that can lead to increased employment of individuals with I/DD. However, for these to become reality requires a stronger and more universal belief in Employment First throughout the state. Policymakers and practitioners must start from a place of truly believing that individuals with I/DD can be successfully employed, and share that optimism with others, including people with I/DD and their families. They must also take actions that support that belief. It is only through having a clear vision for Employment First, and acting upon that vision consistently and on a day-to-day basis, that the promise of Employment First for individuals with I/DD will become reality.

# Advocacy Plan and Implementation

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This report has laid out a comprehensive set of issues and recommendations regarding increasing employment of individuals with I/DD in New Jersey. The task ahead can seem overwhelming and there are no simple quick fixes. However, every effort must be made to avoid this being another case of simply “admiring the problem.” Given the lack of progress regarding integrated employment, accepting the status quo because the problem seems too difficult, or presuming that “we’re doing the best we can” is unacceptable: unacceptable for individuals with I/DD, for their families, and for the state of New Jersey as a whole. Realizing the vision of Employment First will require a commitment by the full range of stakeholders to work together, measure progress, hold themselves mutually accountable, and diligently make changes over time.

A core theme of the High-Performing States Framework is that systems change to improve employment for individuals with I/DD requires addressing a series of inter-related components. In terms of setting priorities, it is important to focus on:

- ▶ An array of items that affect various components of the High-Performing States Framework.
- ▶ A mix of items that are readily achievable and impactful (e.g., development of materials and products), and others that will take sustained effort over time (e.g., changes in policies).

A suggested first step in translating this report into action is implementing the recommendation to create an Employment First commission that provides leadership and coordination of efforts to increase employment of persons with I/DD, while enabling various stakeholders to work together on common goals. From there, using the High-Performing States Framework as a guide, this report suggests the following areas of initial action:

1. Begin to address the full array of interagency issues with a focus on building cross-agency relationships through collaborative activities, resulting in trusting partnerships built over time.
2. Strengthen data collection, reporting, and transparency.
3. Institute consistency in terms of self-determination and informed choice regarding employment.
4. Address support coordination issues.
5. Review and address DVRS eligibility determination issues and expand the diversity of trial work sites.
6. Address the range of issues regarding authorization of services and braiding and blending of services.
7. Fully engage self-advocates and families on Employment First, including the creation of user-friendly information and materials that enable individuals and families to navigate the system.
8. Diversify sites for community assessments and employment through greater and more diverse business engagement.
9. Build a stronger network for benefits planning.
10. Update resources on transition on the New Jersey Department of Education website, in part to assist under-resourced schools.
11. Take initial steps to address needs of underserved communities and populations.
12. Begin rollout of communications strategy.

Details regarding these items are contained in the full version of this report. While it is recommended that the 12 items listed above be addressed most immediately after the formation of the Employment First commission, over the long term all recommendations in this report should be addressed in some form. It is recognized that leadership may feel other recommendations in this report take precedence, as more critical and/or more readily achievable. However, what's most

important is to maintain a broad and ongoing focus on a multitude of items that advance employment of individuals with I/DD, that address various aspects of the High-Performing States Framework, and create sustained change over time. To put it simply, there is not one solution, there are lots of solutions.

## **Next Steps**

It is recommended that this report be used as the basis for a “call to action” regarding Employment First. Suggested steps include:

1. Widely circulating this report among policymakers, legislators, public agencies, service providers, advocacy organizations, individuals with I/DD, and their families.
2. Creation of short summary documents regarding the report's findings.
3. Holding a series of community forums to share and discuss the report's findings. In developing such forums consideration should be given to:
  - ▶ Provision of information regarding the report's findings that is highly accessible for individuals with I/DD.
  - ▶ Ensuring participation by individuals from diverse and traditionally underserved communities.
4. Engaging in discussions with other states that have been on a similar journey to learn from their experiences.

## **Creating a Culture of Change**

As efforts move forward to take the recommendations of this report and translate them into action, it is important that this effort be conducted within an atmosphere that will promote change. Doing so requires recognizing and acting on the following:

1. Like all states, there is room for significant improvement in integrated employment for individuals with I/DD in New Jersey.
2. That all entities and stakeholders need to make changes and improvements themselves, in order for the state to address the employment needs of individuals with I/DD as a collective whole.
3. That all entities and stakeholders have a role in the problems and challenges that exist, and in creating solutions.
4. That to be successful, efforts to advance Employment First must be done in an atmosphere of collegiality, mutual respect, encouragement of diversity of views, and emphasis on building strong partnerships over the long term.
5. There are no simple or easy solutions. Realizing the promise of Employment First is a long-term process that addresses a wide range of policy and practice issues.
6. That individuals with I/DD and their families must be fully engaged in advancing Employment First.
7. That aligned with Employment First, there is a sincere belief by all involved that with the right assistance and supports, individuals with I/DD can be successfully employed.



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## About the Heldrich Center

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The **Heldrich Center for Workforce Development** ([www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)) at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policy-making and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

## About the Institute for Community Inclusion

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The **Institute for Community Inclusion** – [www.communityinclusion.org](http://www.communityinclusion.org) (ICI), is based at the University of Massachusetts Boston, in the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development. Through training, technical assistance, research, and direct service activities, ICI supports the rights of children and adults with disabilities to participate in all aspects of society. Much of ICI's efforts focus on inclusive employment.