

## A Factsheet for Families

### When Everyone Works, Everyone Wins: Employment of People with Disabilities

Iowans with disabilities want to work, to earn money, to be with people during the day, and to develop and practice skills. For many years they and their families have depended upon sheltered workshops to address those needs. Sheltered workshop service providers and staff have offered a supportive, caring environment for thousands of Iowans. In recent years, this “facility based” service model has come under stress for many reasons. At the same time, there is a growing movement in Iowa and around the country that is proving that *ALL* people, including those with significant disabilities, are capable of –and benefit from– community based integrated employment.

**“Employment First” (E1<sup>st</sup>)** is a statewide advocacy effort made up of consumers, families, and providers who are working on a new approach to employment of people with disabilities in Iowa. The mission of E1<sup>st</sup> is for competitive employment in the general workforce to be the first and preferred option for all working age Iowans with disabilities regardless of level of disability. **The intention of E1<sup>st</sup> is to create more employment options, not to close workshops!**

#### What is community-based integrated employment?

- Employment in the general workforce, at minimum wage or above, with opportunities for advancement, and access to benefits.
- Workers have regular and ordinary opportunities to interact with co-workers and customers with and without disabilities.

#### Is this realistic? Can this really work?

- **YES!** As of September 2014, fourteen committed service providers helped 427 Iowans with disabilities to secure community based employment. The average wage was \$7.81 an hour, with the hours worked averaging 17 per week.
- In 2012 The Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP) and the Iowa Coalition for Integrated Employment (ICIE) funded six community providers to support clients in finding community-based jobs using customized employment techniques. Out of 30 job seekers, many previously considered “too disabled to work,” 15 were employed within a year. **Since then more providers have shifted their focus to integrated employment, and reached out for support and technical assistance to improve their services.**

#### How can families support this movement?

- Change expectations: Young people, their parents, and school staff need to prepare for their transition to adulthood with the expectation of meaningful work in the community. Transition services need to include career exploration, work experience during high school, and benefit planning.
- Advocate for a new approach: Currently about 80% of Iowa’s employment services expenses are for sheltered workshops, which seldom result in jobs in the community. In order to provide more individualized services that lead to competitive employment, providers need access to training for their staff and reimbursement for these services at a level that is financially sustainable. Families can support these changes by advocating for community-based integrated employment to service providers, educators, policy makers, and others.

- **Build collaborative partnerships:** Many state agencies play vital roles in increasing employment options for people with disabilities. This includes the Department of Human Services, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation, Iowa Workforce Development, and others. These agencies must align their policies and coordinate their resources in order to achieve desired outcomes for employment services in Iowa. Advocates and family members need to raise expectations for those outcomes.

## **Organizations Supporting This Work in Iowa:**

- **Employment 1<sup>st</sup> (E1st)** is both an idea and the name of an advocacy effort that began in 2009, involving community rehabilitation providers, individuals with disabilities and families, the Iowa Chapter of the Association for People Supporting Employment First (Iowa-APSE), and many state agencies.
- **Iowa DHS (Iowa Medicaid Enterprise and Mental Health and Disability Services)** supports Iowa's membership in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN). This network helped Iowa organize for change in favor of integrated employment options.
- **The Iowa Coalition for Integrated Employment (ICIE)**, is made up of many stakeholders, including schools and vocational rehabilitation counselors, working to strengthen transition services for young people in order to prepare them for jobs in the community before and after graduation. The new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which Congress passed in July 2014, reinforces this effort.
- **Iowa APSE** actively promotes integrated employment by providing leadership, and training, technical assistance; and by advocating for change with legislators and parents.
- **The Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP)** provides Iowa state agencies and community providers access to experts who can advise them on their efforts to redesign services to increase opportunities for competitive, integrated employment.
- **Iowa Association of Community Providers (IACP)**, and numerous Community Rehabilitation Providers serving individuals with disabilities, are partners in these efforts working to transform and increase the community based focus of their services.
- **The Department of Human Services (DHS) and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS)** are working to coordinate policies and funding for employment services and supports to increase options for integrated employment.
- **Iowa Workforce Development's Disability Employment Initiative** is focused on improving the ability of the state's Workforce Center system to serve and include people with disabilities in the workforce of the communities where they live.

## **Resources for Families:**

- **Integrated Employment Toolkit:** The Office of Disability Employment Policy has created toolkits for both youth and adults with disabilities and their families with resources on employment options, effective advocacy, success stories, and more.
- **Advocacy Toolkit:** ID Action's "Advocacy University" has several useful links with information and tips on being an effective policy advocate. Information includes how to track bills, effective ways of communicating with policy makers, and more.