

*Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Developmental Services*

POLICY TITLE: Employment First
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Introduction

The last two decades have seen significant progress in terms of employment in the community for people with intellectual disabilities. It has now been clearly demonstrated that individuals who were previously considered unemployable in integrated community settings can work successfully. Even for those individuals with the most significant level of disability, through careful job matching and support design, employment has been shown to be a viable option. In addition to demonstrating the viability of employment, it also has been clearly shown that employers and community members are capable of providing the necessary supports and assistance for an individual to achieve employment success, supplemented if required by paid staff and services. This shift towards a greater emphasis on community employment echoes the general shift towards services designed to integrate individuals into their communities, with the same opportunities and responsibilities as all other citizens.

Policy Statement

This policy, known as the “Employment First” policy, establishes that for working age adults served by the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services, integrated, individual employment is the preferred service option and optimal outcome. In the development of service plans and service delivery, assistance and supports for individual, integrated employment will be prioritized.

It is recognized that full implementation of this policy will be a long-term process, requiring a general raising of expectations over time, by individuals served by the Department of Developmental Services, their families, as well as DDS and service provider staff concerning the ability of individuals to succeed in individual, integrated employment. This will require a consistent message across the DDS system regarding integrated employment as a priority; consistent actions that reinforce this message; and an infrastructure, including prioritizing and directing of resources, that supports this effort. This will also require a fundamental shift in thinking from a mind-set of integrated employment as an option for some individuals, to employment as a goal for all.

Service Priorities and Definitions

In implementing this policy, the optimal goal is “integrated individual employment.”

Integrated Individual Employment: For the purposes of this policy “integrated individual employment” is defined according to the following criteria:

The individual is hired and paid directly by the employer (i.e., the person is not paid via a subcontract with the service provider).

- Employment takes place in a work place in the community, where the majority of individuals do not have disabilities, and which provides opportunities to interact with non-disabled individuals to the same extent that individuals employed in comparable positions would interact.
- The position is an individual job (i.e., not a group or enclave setting).

Self-employment: This is also an option included under this policy. Self-employment is defined as earning income directly from one's own business, profession, or trade; and not as an employee of a business owned by someone else.

Employment Based on Individual Preferences and Needs: Placement of individuals served by DDS in employment is driven by a person-centered career planning process which identifies an individual's career preferences and choices, and is based on a comprehensive career exploration and assessment process, emphasizing community-based situational assessment. Individuals should be actively involved in the job search process to the maximum extent possible. Placement should emphasize not only job opportunities that are a good match for an individual's work skills and abilities, but also environments that are a good fit for an individual's personality, social needs, and work culture preferences.

Emphasis on Natural Supports: In the course of obtaining employment in the community, emphasis should be placed on work environments with potential availability of natural employer and co-worker supports. Paid supports from service providers should be viewed as supplemental to the existing supports within the work place, and should be provided only as necessary. This does not preclude situations where individuals, because of the nature of their disability, require a significant level of long-term, ongoing paid supports.

Maximizing Work Hours: In providing employment supports, the optimal employment status should be one in which individuals are working the maximum number of hours they are capable of working, and earning the prevailing wage with any associated benefits.

Use of Community Settings for Non-Work Hours: It is expected that through the implementation of this policy, individuals will be engaged primarily in paid employment. However, it is recognized that for individuals who are working on a part-time basis, employment may not fully occupy their weekday hours. For these individuals, it is expected that the priority for activities during non-working daytime hours should be on supporting individuals in other typical adult activities in the community, including volunteer work, recreation, and daily living activities. As with employment, such activities should take place in integrated community settings, on an individual (non-group) basis as much as possible, with an emphasis on non-paid, natural community supports whenever possible. For individuals employed in the community less than full-time who require structured services and supports when they are not working, participation in group/congregate models of service should focus on community integration and skill development.

Conclusion

Employment has clearly benefited individuals in terms of income and economic independence. In addition, given that employment is one of the primary vehicles for community participation in our society; increased employment has also led to greater opportunities for community integration and inclusion. This has not only benefited individuals in terms of building relationships, friendships, and creating a sense of self-worth; but it has also benefited society in terms of creating greater understanding of the wide range of capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities as co-workers, fellow community members, and peers.