

Establishing a National Employment-First Agenda

By *Bob Niemiec*

Individuals with disabilities in the labor force have a positive financial impact on our economy, generating income that is ultimately returned in the form of tax revenues and purchases of goods and services. Despite this knowledge, individuals with disabilities continue to have the highest unemployment rates of any minority group in the nation.

In recent years, there has been a growing grass roots movement to establish Employment First initiatives in the United States (Tennessee, 2002; California, 2005; Indiana, 2005; Minnesota, 2006; Georgia, North Dakota, Wisconsin & Missouri in progress). Many of these states have worked with their state APSE chapter to secure input from stakeholders.

In his final week as Assistant Secretary for the Department of Labor's Office on Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Neil Romano issued a memorandum highlighting the importance of the nation's Employment First movement. According to the former Assistant Secretary, "Several states have moved forward to implement policies that focus on integrated, community-based employment earning at or above the minimum wage as the first option for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Using these 'employment first' policies, states are tapping the skills and contributions of these individuals to match employer demand for a reliable, productive workforce through customized employment opportunities. In these Employment First states, sheltered employment with sub-minimum wages and non-work 'day activities' are no longer acceptable employment outcomes." (ODEP Memorandum, January 15, 2009)

APSE Playing Key Role

State APSE chapters or other entities with the

active participation of APSE members are leading most of the Employment First initiatives the former Assistant Secretary referred to. A recent report shared by APSE state chapter presidents revealed that 12 states were already actively involved in Employment First initiatives or considering the launch of local efforts focusing on Employment First within their state. In addition, many state APSE chapters are asking for guidance to assist in the development of local Employment First coalitions and partnerships throughout the U.S.

What is Employment First?

Although no universal definition of "employment first" exists, the policies, practices, and strategies focus on integrated, community-based employment as the desired outcome for individuals with disabilities. Employment First strategies generally consist of a clear set of guiding principles, policies, and practices disseminated through state statute, regulation or operational procedures that identify employment in integrated, community-based businesses as the priority for state funding. A number of state initiatives have taken steps to clarify what employment first means. In Minnesota, for example, employment first means "*expecting, encouraging, providing, creating, and rewarding integrated employment in the workforce as the first and preferred option of youth and adults with disabilities.*" (Minnesota's Employment First Manifesto, 2007).

Employment First initiatives highlight the need to raise expectations and implement better practices about employment for individuals with disabilities. To that end, many state initiatives have taken additional steps to define what "employment" means to ensure the goal of integrated jobs in the workforce at competitive wages and benefits. While Employment First initiatives often utilize supported employment and customized employment strate-

gies, employment is not defined as using these terms. Employment First initiatives center on holding individuals with disabilities to the same employment standards, responsibilities, and sets of expectations as any working-age adult.

Employment First is about raising expectations. The real engine of social change is not money but expectations. Without higher expectations, individuals with disabilities and their families often settle for programs or services that do not encourage them to participate fully in the mainstream of community life. This is confirmed by the fact that a majority of working age adults with significant disabilities are supported today in programs that offer segregation and long-term dependency regardless of the cost.

How can Employment First initiatives increase the demand for integrated employment? Better public education and policy advocacy can accomplish this objective. Individuals with disabilities and their families must be made more aware of the integrated employment opportunities that are available. It is particularly instructive to share employment success stories to create hope, stimulate imagination, and increase expectations of all stakeholders. When individuals with disabilities and their families recognize the clear benefits, their expectations will change and they will choose work!

One Size Doesn't Fit All

There is no single “cookie cutter” approach to implementing an Employment First strategy in a given state. Although there is much to be learned from successful initiatives, each alliance must address systems, and policy and funding barriers in its own backyard. Transforming a network of education, disability, workforce development, business, and human service systems is challenging and complex work. Needless to say, state coalitions and local Community Action Teams will need buy-in from key stakeholders to plan and implement multi-dimensional organization and systems change strategies.

Our country *already* spends millions of dollars on secondary education, adult community services, Social Security disability benefits, transportation, and comprehensive health care of Americans with disabilities. Many of these resources, however, do not encourage or reward real jobs in the community

workforce. Resolving our national unemployment problem will require a shift in policies and “rebalancing” of many existing resources.

The most successful initiatives recognize that their core charge is to thoughtfully and methodically address policies that encourage and support competitive employment outcomes. This vision for change needs to be reflected in all appropriate public policies impacting education as well as adult health, disability, and human services. To the fullest extent possible, public policies need to be unmistakably clear about expectations as well as provide for flexibility to rebalance existing resources. This means moving aggressively to develop new policies or amend existing ones to promote an employment first approach.

In addition to the development of new policies or the amendment of existing policies, Employment First initiatives also include:

- Rebalancing public resources;
- Retooling job roles for educators and disability support professionals;
- Staff development training;
- Transforming organizations and their administrative infrastructures;
- Business marketing and development;
- Peer mentoring strategies; and
- Infusing promising practices, such as customized and supported employment as well as self-employment and business ownership.

Summary

In order to advance the growing national momentum to focus on integrated employment as the desired outcome for individuals with disabilities, the Board of Directors of APSE recently established a strategic objective to support and promote the Employment First movement throughout the United States. National APSE and its state chapters can play an effective role in leading the Employment First movement.

Together, we can lead this transformation of state and local support systems to promote, encourage, engage, and reward integrated employment as the first choice of youth and adults with disabilities. There has never been a better time than now and no organization better positioned than APSE to take up this national challenge. ■

Bob Niemiec is a Senior Consultant for Griffin-Hammis Associates, LLC; and a founding member of The Minnesota Employment First Coalition. For more information, contact him at (651) 334-0235 or bniemiec@griffinhammis.com.

For more information, visit www.apse.org