

Dear Community Providers:

Please see below the additional details related to the Employment First Initiative, which may be distributed broadly to provide helpful context related to the previous Communication Alert.

Thank you for your efforts to spread the word about the open comment period.

Employment First is a policy that promotes community-based, integrated employment as the first option for employment-related services for individuals with disabilities, physical, intellectual, or behavioral. The idea is that all Illinois citizens, regardless of disability, are capable of full participation and integration in their communities and that includes employment.

Illinois Policy

Illinois has adopted an Employment First policy via the Employment First Act ([20 ILCS 40](#)) in 2013. This law states that "competitive and integrated employment shall be considered the first option when serving persons with disabilities of working age" and requires all State agencies to follow the policy as well as ensure its effective implementation within their programs and services.

Additionally, Illinois has an Executive Order ([14-08](#)) that requires the participation of multiple state agencies to fully implement Employment First across the State. The state agencies include: the Department of Human Services, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, the Department of Employment Security, the Department of Central Management Services, the Department of Labor, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the State Board of Education, the Board of Higher Education, the Community College Board, and the Council on Developmental Disabilities. The Order requires the above agencies to look at everything from policies to funding to partnerships all focused around the goal of integrated employment for individuals with disabilities.

Employment First - Employment for ALL

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to establish Employment First initiatives in the United States. Currently 36 states, including Illinois have some form of Employment First related legislation or executive order. Employment First States hold the belief that employment must be the first priority and preferred outcome for people with disabilities.

Employment First is policies, practices and strategies that focus on integrated, community-based employment as the desired outcome for individuals with disabilities. Strategies highlight the need to raise expectations and implement better practices around employment for individuals with disabilities.

Employment is defined as regular or customized employment in the workforce

- Where employees with disabilities are included on the payroll of a competitive business or industry (unless self-employed)
- Where the assigned employment tasks offer at least minimum or prevailing wages and benefits
- And offer ordinary opportunities for integration and interaction with co-workers without disabilities, with customers, and/or the general public.

Illinois House Bill 655 in the 96th General Assembly, which became law (Public Act 96-368) on August 13, 2009, established the Illinois Task Force on Employment and Economic Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities. The duties of the Task Force include:

- Analyze programs and policies of the State to determine what changes, modifications, and innovations may be necessary to remove barriers to competitive employment and economic opportunity for persons with disabilities, including barriers such as transportation, housing, program accessibility, and benefit structure.
- Analyze State disability systems, including the mental health, developmental disabilities, veterans' assistance, workforce investment, and rehabilitation services systems, and their effect on employment of persons with disabilities.
- Review and analyze applicable research and policy studies, innovations used in other states, and any federal policy initiatives such as customized employment, and federal funding opportunities that would increase competitive employment and economic opportunity for persons with disabilities in Illinois.

In 2011 the Task Force hosted an Employment First Summit whereby stakeholders including legislators, state agency administrators, service providers and people with disabilities were invited. The outcome of this summit was an expressed interest and commitment to establish Illinois as an Employment First State. To that end, Legislation was introduced in 2013 which passed with overwhelming support and signed into law by Former Governor Patrick Quinn in July 2013 (PL 98-0091). To facilitate the implementation of the legislation the Governor's Office issued an Executive Order in July of 2014 (Executive Order Number 14-08).

The Executive Order called for the development of a Strategic Plan to implement Employment First in Illinois. The plan includes strategies for:

- Improving strategies and supports necessary to make disability employment part of the state workforce development strategy, prioritize integrated employment as the first option for people with disabilities, and increase integrated community employment;
- Identifying and implementing policy changes to align with the goals of Employment First;
- Finding and supporting businesses in their efforts to employ people with disabilities;
- Transition planning and services in full compliance with applicable state and federal laws and regulations, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Illinois School Code which prepare youth with disabilities for careers that use their full potential, including early career awareness and work experience. Creating the necessary infrastructure to accomplish these goals; and
- Establish benchmarks and collecting data to track employment outcomes.

The Task Force established several work groups to develop the Strategic Plan. Each workgroup was co-chaired by a public member and a State Agency member of the Task Force. Each work group was comprised of public and state agency members of the task force, additional state agency representation as appropriate, members of the public including service providers, educational entities, persons with disabilities and employers.

Each work group met over a series of months via teleconference and in-person meetings to develop the Strategic Plan recommendations. Initial drafts were reviewed by the Task Force and State Agencies prior to releasing the draft to the public for additional review. Comments are sought from the public at this time to ensure that the Strategic Plan represents a broad range of perspectives on this issue.

Comments will come in without filter, be incorporated as determined applicable by the subcommittees and taskforce as a whole, and then the entire set of recommendations will be submitted to the Governor's Office, the Illinois State Legislature, and relevant state agencies.

The web address is: <http://employmentfirst.illinois.gov>

There is a link to the open comment page on the right hand side of this page.

How to Read and Comment on Workgroup Activities

The open comment period ends 6/28/16

To read workgroup suggestions and make comments,

1. Please click on one of the workgroups listed on the top right of this page.
2. You will be taken to a webpage where the workgroup's recommendation areas are described by activity.
3. Click on the activity you want to learn about
4. Offer feedback by clicking on the comment page link at the bottom of the page
5. Fill out the comment form and click submit