**Employment Issues for People with Developmental Disabilities**

**Next Steps for Missouri**

The majority of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are either unemployed or underemployed, despite their ability, desire, and willingness to work in the community in competitive integrated employment. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) [regularly reports](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t06.htm) that the percentage of working-age people with disabilities in the labor force is about one-third that of persons with no disability. On average, workers with disabilities face significant [gaps in pay and compensation](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ICS/InsightsAndConvenings/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=1052721). This is true in Missouri and across the USA.

At the same time, it is also clear that the vast majority of people with I/DD are capable of working in competitive integrated employment when provided with supported or customized employment in work that aligns with individual interests and abilities.

In addition, leading national advocacy and self-advocacy organizations call for increases and improvements in integrated employment. The Arc of the United States, has a position statement that calls for “the supports necessary“ to enable people to find and keep community jobs based on their preferences, interests, and strengths, to work alongside people without disabilities, and receive comparable wages. The position also includes an “Employment First” focus, meaning that competitive integrated employment should be the first option offered to individuals with I/DD.

<http://www.thearc.org/who-we-are/position-statements/life-in-the-community/employment>

A study in the state of Indiana found that two thirds of people in sheltered work would prefer community competitive integrated employment.

In Missouri, there are approximately 7,000 individuals in sheltered workshops and we know that some of these individuals are interested in competitive integrated employment in their communities.

On a national scale, the federal government has created a greater emphasis in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, in guidance provided by CMS, and in Department of Justice Settlement Agreements with several states.

**Principles for Missouri in the Years Ahead**

As Missouri moves into the future on employment for people with I/DD, it will be important that several principles guide this work.

**Flexible Stable Access**

There is a need for flexibility to move in and out of sheltered employment, even doing so concurrently with competitive integrated employment.  This is a necessity for individuals and families to see the move from sheltered employment to the community as less risky.  An individual should be able to work some hours in the sheltered environment while also working some hours in the community, if needed, while emphasizing the opportunities in competitive integrated employment.  This flexibility would eliminate the "all or nothing" interpretation, which has been espoused historically.  It would allow an individual to transition to work in the community at a pace best suited to the needs of the individual.

Currently in Missouri there is a need for continued access to multiple levels of support for individuals with I/DD in the employment setting, as long as those opportunities do not violate federal law.  This should include sheltered work environments, waiver funded employment supports, group or enclave employment supports and fully integrated competitive employment options.  An individual should have the opportunity to choose the setting which best fits their needs and desires.

**Creating a comprehensive Continuum of Training and Employment options for Individuals with Disabilities**

There is a need to develop capacity in counties across Missouri. This means there is a need to assist workshops and other employment service providers to develop the infrastructure and develop staff to become employment specialists to increase access to competitive integrated employment. From sheltered employment to competitive employment, there is a need to provide evidence-based training with incentives for success. This will include the need for training and technical assistance to providers as well as a review of funding structures to provide incentives for developing competitive integrated employment. This includes the need to provide support for existing providers of services to change over time to provide competitive integrated employment, and develop “train the trainer” efforts across the state. In addition, this work should emphasize employment outcomes, as a result of employment services.

Missouri should allow and encourage cooperative mentoring between nationally accredited employment agencies, workshops and other new emerging employment providers desiring to provide community employment.

**Expansion of Competitive Integrated Employment Statewide**

A primary need is to build the capacity to deliver competitive integrated employment in counties across Missouri. This will include work with advocates, providers of employment services, sheltered workshops, case managers, the state Vocational Rehabilitation Office, the Division of Developmental Disabilities in the Missouri Department of Mental Health, and others to focus on increasing competitive integrated employment as the most important goal.

**Preserve Choices for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.**

This kind of change will take time. There will be a continued need for sheltered workshops in the years ahead even as more individuals choose integrated employment. Indeed, some individuals may prefer not to make a change. We understand that competitive integrated employment opportunities need to be made much more available, but not to remove sheltered employment as a choice if the individual and/or family deem it as the most appropriate option at this time.

Preserving current choices includes addressing two major individual and family concerns. When individuals with I/DD successfully enter into competitive employment, they, and their families, fear losing benefits. This concern must be addressed through careful planning and informed decision-making utilizing state and federal incentives to work. This will include the need for new roles for case managers and benefits planning specialists. The second major concern is the consequences of losing a competitive integrated job. There may be some fear that being unsuccessful in a community job, for reasons of productivity, or social adjustment, may mean that alternative employment supports may no longer be available. It is important to insure that individuals will have access to other settings and supports.

**Coordinated Employment Transition**

In Missouri we need to establish provider contracts, state regulations, and bureaucratic interpretations for employment supports that are consistent and complimentary toward the efforts between schools, Voc Rehab, DESE, Sheltered Workshops, DMH and the Department of Labor. These cooperative efforts should focus on proactive support for work choices. If strategic and regulatory changes are necessary, the General Assembly and the Governor should be requested to pass legislation creating a more flexible, better coordinated, stable, and effective system resulting in more competitive integrated employment of people with developmental disabilities.

It will be important for the Missouri Disability Community to speak with one voice about the need and opportunity to increase access to competitive integrated employment, while ensuring that individuals and families do not lose services and supports. It will also be critical that all parties work together to develop the capacity to deliver more competitive integrated employment across Missouri.