
TCDD 2013 Public Policy Recommendation

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

The State of Texas should adopt a policy that competitive employment at a living wage¹ in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome of publicly-funded services for all working-age Texans with disabilities, regardless of disability. This policy will ultimately reduce per-capita costs of publicly funded services for Texans with disabilities by assisting them in preparing for, finding and maintaining positions in the workforce. A Texas Employment First Policy must include clear provisions that ensure:

- Individuals with disabilities, particularly students, understand and are given the opportunity to explore further training, including graduate and post-graduate education, as a pathway to employment;
- Individualized training and supports in the preferred line of work are available and accessible;
- Resources to understand the effect of earned income on their public benefits are available and accessible; and
- Competitive employment, while the first and preferred option of services, is not required to secure and maintain necessary health care and supports.

TCDD also recommends that an interagency task force be established to (1) design a process in a finite period of time to raise expectations through education and outreach to individuals with disabilities, families, agencies and service provider staff concerning the ability of individuals to succeed in integrated, individualized, competitive employment; (2) develop recommendations for policy and procedure changes necessary across state agencies for an Employment First Policy to be fully implemented; and (3) produce a report on the reduction in publicly-funded services when competitive employment is the first and preferred option of service.

Benefits of Employment First

An Employment First Policy holds individuals with disabilities to the same employment standards, responsibilities, and sets of expectations as any working-age adult. Employment First is a declaration of both philosophy and policy stating that competitive employment is the first and preferred outcome of publicly-funded services for people with disabilities. Access to jobs paying a living wage is essential if citizens with disabilities are to avoid lives of poverty, dependence and isolation. When people with disabilities are employed and living more independently, they are less reliant on government payments and contribute to the economy.

The Texas Legislature has created opportunities for Texas to be attractive to business, drawn, in part, by a workforce educated by our world-class university system. TCDD's goal is to ensure that those businesses also find an educated, prepared workforce that includes Texans with disabilities. Prioritizing employment would result in increased spending by the expanded workforce and would minimize the

¹ Living Wage is the minimum income necessary for a worker to meet basic needs including food, clothing, shelter and comforts essential to an acceptable standard of living.

social services used. Innovation, creative thinking and determination are traits people with disabilities develop in response to the many challenges and obstacles experienced in their day to day life. As employees, they add to the range of viewpoints businesses need to succeed, offering fresh ideas on how to solve problems, accomplish tasks and implement strategies.ⁱ

Issues Addressed by Employment First Policy

National surveys show that the majority of people with disabilities want to have a job in the community. The current low participation rate of citizens with disabilities in the workforce is unacceptable. For example, National Core Indicators survey data shows that 74 percent of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities do not have a community job and 47 percent of those without a job would like one. Advances in education and community living cannot be fully leveraged or realized when so few people with disabilities actually work in the community.

People with disabilities are routinely placed into non-integrated settings instead of community-based employment despite the availability of common accommodations. Segregated programs and sheltered workshop environments often pay sub-minimum wage and fail to cultivate a person's potential. Costs associated with these programs and the other publicly-funded supports needed when an individual is not able to reach their full potential for independence in the community could be avoided with the implementation of an Employment First Policy.

ⁱ Office of Disability Employment Policy, "Diverse Perspectives: People with Disabilities Fulfilling Your Business Goals". Accessed: August 3, 2011. <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/diverse.htm>