



## **Employment First in Pennsylvania**

On March 10, 2016, Governor Tom Wolf signed an Executive Order making Pennsylvania an “Employment First” state. “Employment First” is a national movement that impacts individuals with disabilities who work, and those who may want to try work, but may have never even thought about it before. Under “Employment First”, employment in the general workforce should be competitive and integrated for all people, regardless of disability. It should also be the first and preferred outcome of publicly-funded programs for Pennsylvanians with disabilities in areas such as education, employment, training and long-term services and supports.

Competitive integrated employment means being employed at minimum wage or better and mostly working with or interacting with people without disabilities.

“Employment First” will allow individuals with disabilities access to services and supports to work in a competitive job in the community that offers the possibility of greater income, increased independence, and a sense of self-worth. Individuals can enhance their careers by utilizing their strengths and talents while giving employers access to dependable and qualified employees, and creating diversity in the workforce.

## **Employment First and Transition**

Transition is a critical focus in the Employment First model. It is intended to address barriers to transition planning and services in order to achieve meaningful adult employment outcomes.

Transitions from early intervention to preschool, kindergarten, middle school, and high school are intended to prepare a child with or without a disability, for adult life. Secondary Transition is the process of preparing students for adult life after they leave high school. In Pennsylvania, secondary transition begins at age 14, or younger if determined appropriate by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. It is also when students consider their goals for the time after graduation through career awareness exploration activities. The transition process continues through high school with classroom instruction and community experiences that help clarify and support students' goals.

A good transition plan will look at a student's needs, taking into account his or her strengths, preferences, and interests. Once it identifies an individual's talents, skills, and interests, this information will help inform employment options and career opportunities.

One of the main directives of Employment First is that the first and preferred outcome of publicly-funded programs in education should result in employment. Therefore, transition planning cannot be left out of that equation for any student.

## **Walk the Employment First Talk**

Here are some suggestions about how you can be part of making Employment First effective:

- Ask “how” or “when” you can become employed, not “if”.
- Start early (at least by age 14) with transition assessments that are updated annually.
- Gather work experience on “soft skills” such as communication, interpersonal and social skills that will transfer to the workplace.
- Get involved with families and student support systems.
- Ask questions about individualized employment goals in your IEP related to achieving real work for real wages.
- Discuss pre-employment transition services in your IEP. These should be based on your preferences and interests.
- Look for employment opportunities during the summer.
- Strive for paid work experience in a job that is a good career match during your last year of school, or even earlier. Consider part-time work over the summer, or a paid position as part of school-provided extended school year (ESY).
- Network with school, family and community contacts for job opportunities.
- Talk about benefits planning if you receive Social Security Disability benefits or SSI.

## **Contact Information**

If you need more information or need help, please contact Disability Rights

Pennsylvania (DRP) at 800-692-7443 (voice) or 877-375-7139 (TDD). The email address is: [intake@disabilityrightspa.org](mailto:intake@disabilityrightspa.org).

The mission of Disability Rights Pennsylvania is to advance, protect, and advocate for the human, civil, and legal rights of Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Due to our limited resources, Disability Rights Pennsylvania cannot provide individual services to every person with advocacy and legal issues. Disability Rights Pennsylvania prioritizes cases that have the potential to result in widespread, systemic changes to benefit persons with disabilities. While we cannot provide assistance to everyone, we do seek to provide every individual with information and referral options.

**IMPORTANT: This publication is for general informational purposes only. This publication is not intended, nor should be construed, to create an attorney-client relationship between Disability Rights Pennsylvania and any person. Nothing in this publication should be considered to be legal advice.**

**PLEASE NOTE: For information in alternative formats or a language other than English, contact Disability Rights Pennsylvania at 800-692-7443, Ext. 400, TDD: 877-375-7139 or [intake@disabilityrightspa.org](mailto:intake@disabilityrightspa.org).**

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