

Montana Employment First White Paper

This document reflects a collaborative effort between the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Vocational Rehabilitation and statewide partners committed to advancing *Employment First* principles. Together, these agencies are focused on ensuring that Montanans with disabilities have every opportunity to pursue **Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)** and live meaningful lives in their communities.

Employment First is not a program. *Employment First* is a commitment, philosophy, and framework that **employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome of publicly funded services for all working-age Montanans with disabilities**. It also recognizes that employment exists within a broader life of community connection and engagement. Employment First **does not mean Employment Only**. It means that people have the right to work *and* the right to participate in civic, educational, recreational, and social life with or without accommodation.

To advance Employment First in a rural and frontier state like Montana, we must be innovative in our approach to employment taking into consideration how and where Montanans choose to live. In a state where distance, transportation, and local economies influence access to employment, it is essential to be creative in expanding opportunities such as telework and community-based jobs.

Defining Competitive Integrated Employment

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) means work that is:

1. **Competitive:** Paid at or above minimum wage, with wages and benefits equal to those received by co-workers without disabilities for similar work.
2. **Integrated:** Occurring in community settings where employees with and without disabilities interact as peers, with opportunities for advancement.
3. **Employment:** Including self-employment and entrepreneurship, leading to self-sufficiency, independence, and dignity.

Montana's Employment First Vision

Montana's *Employment First* framework is built on the belief that every person has talents, interests, and capacities that can contribute to their community and the economy. Employment is both a **civil right** and an **economic driver** that strengthens families, communities, and businesses.

Employment First means public systems will align policy, funding, and practice to ensure:

- Competitive, Integrated Employment (CIE) shall be recognized as the initial, preferred and priority outcome for all working-age Montanans with disabilities.
- Services be administered and financed in a manner that prioritizes opportunities for employment and community participation in integrated settings rather than segregated or facility-based services.

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- Individuals with disabilities must have equitable access to the services, supports, healthcare, and pathways necessary to pursue their chosen goals related to employment, independence, and community inclusion.
- A person is able to receive disability benefits and enjoy a career.

Guiding Principles

- Zero Exclusion
 - Everyone is presumed capable of work and contribution
- Self Determination and Informed Choice
 - Individuals control their career path and goal
- Dignity of Risk and Growth
 - People learn and grow through real experiences
- Person-Centered, Strengths-Based
 - Supports are tailored to the individual
- CIE is the First and Preferred Outcome
 - Real jobs, real wages, real inclusion
- Employment is a social determinate of health
 - Employment improves both mental health as well as physical and financial health

Aligning Services, Expectations, and Systems

Achieving Montana's Employment First vision requires more than policy commitment—it demands a coordinated transformation of **services, expectations, and systems**.

- **Services:** Employment and skill building in day services must be designed and delivered in ways that support individual choice with the end goal of competitive integrated employment and community life.
- **Expectations:** We presume that all Montanans with disabilities can work in competitive integrated employment settings. Employment and inclusion shall be viewed as the standard—not the exception.
- **Systems:** State agencies, Tribal Governments, and Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation must align policy, funding, training, and data collection to reinforce these expectations. This includes coordinated rate structures, cross-agency planning, and integrated data systems that track outcomes in employment and community participation.

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Embedding these elements across Montana's service infrastructure ensures Employment First becomes the organizing principle—not an isolated initiative.

Employment First does not mean Employment Only

Employment is a cornerstone of inclusion but not the whole structure. Community Life Engagement (CLE) is the companion to Employment First, ensuring that individuals:

- Build skills and social networks through volunteerism, education, and recreation.
- Participate in civic and cultural life.
- Enjoy total person health, physical and mental.
- Develop the confidence, relationships, and experiences that lead to work and community belonging.

CLE creates meaningful opportunities for growth and connection before, during, and beyond paid employment.

Montana's Momentum for Systems Change

Montana's Employment First initiative builds upon a foundation of **recent policy and systems-level progress** demonstrating the state's commitment to expanding inclusive employment opportunities and aligning public investments to achieve them.

- **406 Jobs Executive Order:** Governor Gianforte's 406 Jobs initiative provides a statewide framework for targeting workforce development resources across six key industries. Through this initiative, Montana VRBS and its partners are expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in high-demand fields and community-based employment.
- **Olmstead Commitment:** The Olmstead decision reaffirmed that individuals with disabilities have the right to live and work in the most integrated settings possible. Montana's strategic planning and Employment First efforts advance this principle by prioritizing competitive, integrated employment and community participation over segregated models of service delivery.
- **NEON Project Partnership with ODEP:** Montana's participation in the **National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON)**, led by the U.S. Department of Labor's **Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)**, has accelerated cross-agency collaboration and policy alignment. The NEON initiative provides Montana with technical assistance to strengthen data integration, rate structures, and policy coordination to promote competitive, integrated employment (CIE).
- **Policy Modernization and Provider Capacity:** Montana VR is reviewing and revising internal policies to reflect the principles of Employment First prioritizing evidence-based and research-informed models. This focus includes building the capacity of providers statewide to deliver these services with fidelity and quality, ensuring individuals receive the supports necessary to achieve CIE.

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Together, these initiatives demonstrate a unified state effort to align services, expectations, and systems toward a single goal: expanding access to integrated employment and full community participation for all Montanans with disabilities.

Montana's Path Forward: The Employment First Workgroup & Action Plan

To translate Montana's Employment First vision into actionable change, MT VR has convened a Montana Employment First Workgroup, composed of representatives from key state agencies (e.g., VRBS, DPHHS, Medicaid, Office of Public Instruction), provider networks, tribal representation, self-advocates, and families.

Mission of the Workgroup:

- Guide and oversee the implementation of Employment First reforms across Montana.
- Develop a coherent, phased **Action Plan** by **May 2026** that lays out priority strategies, timelines, and accountability measures.
- Serve as the cross-agency governance body that ensures alignment of policy, funding, and practice.

Montana is already making progress through strong collaboration across various programs, yet challenges remain:

- Limited provider capacity and transportation options, including in rural regions.
- Gaps in assistive technology and benefits planning.
- Misalignment between VR, Medicaid, and workforce systems.
- Continued reliance on facility-based or segregated models.

Call to Action

Montana's Employment First initiative represents a shared commitment to equality, dignity, and economic opportunity. It asks every system—education, Medicaid, workforce, VR, and industry—to work in alignment toward two clear goals:

A Montana where every person with a disability can live, work, and contribute as a valued member of their community.

A Montana where industry has the opportunity to grow and thrive, with access to high quality talent.

Inclusion and community engagement are foundational to the success of *Employment First* in Montana.

To move forward, Montana will:

- Reinvest Public Funds

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- Prioritize community-based employment and engagement
- Incentivize High Quality Employment Outcomes
 - Measured by wages, hours, and benefits
 - A process in place to track expectations and outcomes
- Coordinate Funding
 - VR, Medicaid, and workforce systems coordinate funding to ensure supported and customized employment
- Strengthen Provider Resources
 - Strengthen provider access and technical assistance in evidence-based practices
- Enhance Data Systems
 - Track outcomes through coordinated and consistent data to ensure accountability
- Engage Individuals, Families, Providers, and Employers
 - Educate stakeholders on the value proposition of competitive, integrated employment and what they can do to achieve it across MT and in alignment with important initiatives such as 406 Jobs.

Resources:

1. Lavin, Don. (2025) The Death of Rehabilitation or Lightning New Pathways to Inclusive Working Life,
2. Iowa's Employment 1st White Paper