**How is the State of Tennessee Supporting the Employment Goals of People with Disabilities?**

**Tennessee’s New Employment First Strategic Plan 2021-2024**

This strategic plan tells how state agencies, disability groups, and college and university centers will work together to grow employment options for people with disabilities.

**Why do Tennessee’s disability employment plans matter to me?**

All Tennesseans – whether you are a person with a disability, a person who loves someone with a disability, a professional in the disability field, an employer, or a taxpayer contributing to public programs – are affected in some way by disability employment.

Tennessee is an Employment First State. Employment First means employment is the preferred option for every person getting disability services. Before, people with disabilities did not have the same opportunities to work as people without disabilities. In Tennessee, we can be proud that an Employment First Task Force meets regularly. The Task Force includes professionals and citizens who all work on growing employment options for people with disabilities.

The Task Force has a strategic plan that sets goals and helps us measure progress toward making sure, someday, people with disabilities have the same employment rates as people without disabilities. [LINK TO “CLOSE THE GAP”]. A report is presented to the Governor every year.

Tennessee has an [Employment First website](https://www.tn.gov/didd/for-consumers/employment--first.html) where you can read the annual reports, see videos of real Tennesseans impacted by this work, and find the strategic plans.

**Tennessee’s Employment First Strategic Plan: 2021-2024**

**SERVICE ALIGNMENT:** Make sure employment programs work together so that it’s easier for the customer to find and use those programs.

**Strategies:**

* Set goals for improving disability employment. Use national employment data to measure progress.
* Find ways and make commitments to work together across agencies (for example, through formal agreements, joint trainings, etc).
* Identify and fix system barriers to employment services (i.e., barriers that involve multiple agencies)
* Make sure all employment programs are based on up-to-date research, training, and resources about what works best.
* Make sure disability services are all working together at the community level.
* Work together to increase funding for the professionals supporting people with disabilities (i.e., provider agencies and direct support professionals).

**How we will measure progress:**

* Update the [“close the gap” infographic](https://www.dropbox.com/s/t8zu7akooe1qoz3/Statewide%20Employment%20Goal%20%282019%29.pdf?dl=0) every year.
* Review formal agreements between agencies every year to make sure they stay updated.
* Track how often and what happens after the Employment First Task Force gives input for employment:
  + Legislation/policies
  + Partners (for example, advice on solving issues)
  + Community programs
* Track results of work to support disability service providers and direct support professionals across state agencies.

**TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION:** Make sure employment programs offer technology to support people with disabilities in employment.

**Strategies:**

* Increase awareness of technology as a support for employment.
* Promote better access to and training about using technology for people with disabilities.
* Review how different state employment programs use technology now. Make recommendations for improving coordination across those programs.
* Work to have Tennessee named as a Technology First State.

**How we will measure progress:**

* Track the number of people using technology in employment.
* Track the number of events, presentations, and other ways used to increase awareness of technology options for employment.
* Create a cross-agency committee or council to advise on using technology for employment.
* Develop an annual report that uses the same tracking to report on the use of technology supports across state agencies.

**EMPLOYERS:** Increase the number of employers who value and hire people with disabilities.

**Strategies:**

* Work with the Governor’s office so [jobs4tn.gov](https://www.jobs4tn.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx) can connect employers and job seekers with disabilities.
* Work with local and state Chambers of Commerce to build relationships with employers.
* Work with Department of Human Resources to attract and better support state employees with disabilities (i.e., “State as a Model Employer”).
* Use ways proven to work to get employers involved (for example, working with VR’s Business Employer Consultants Program or starting a state chapter of Disability:IN).
* Set up ways to get regular input from employers.

**How we will measure progress:**

* Tracking:
  + Number of employers who claim the TN tax credit for hiring people with disabilities
  + Number of job applicants and employees who say they are a person with a disability
  + Number of relationships agencies form with new employers
  + Number of agencies who offer pilot programs to hire people with disabilities, and how many people they hired
* Develop an annual “employer snapshot”

**COMMUNITY AWARENESS:** Build awareness and shared commitment to Employment First. This means all Tennesseans will believe that everyone can work with the right supports.

**Strategies:**

* Develop common messaging about disability employment that all agencies can share. People with disabilities should be the top priority audience.
* Show how state partners are working together to help local communities see how to work together on employment.
* Publicly celebrate employers who hire people with disabilities.
* Use the Center for Decision-Making Support to help people plan for the future, including employment: [www.tndecisionmaking.org](http://www.tndecisionmaking.org).

**How we will measure progress:**

* Track number of organizations who are part of the Employment First communication group.
* Track awareness “outputs” (messages that promote employment) and “reach” (how many people see those messages) across agencies.
* Track number and results of efforts to reach underserved/unserved and marginalized groups of people (for example, Black or Latino communities)
* Report on how much agencies worked together to track communication data.

**STUDENT TRANSITION:** Prepare students for life after high school.

**Strategies:**

* Grow local resources that help students get ready for life after high school.
* Make sure employment programs are connected to resources that help with the school-to-adult transition (for example, Career and Technical Education, Transition TN, The Arc TN, and STEP TN)
* Create employment training for high school teachers and providers who offer pre-employment services in schools.
* Help school administrators know the importance of transition and employment supports.
* Share stories of schools and programs that do a good job of connecting students to early work experiences.
* Increase paid work opportunities for students while they are still in school.
* Help students find job opportunities in their communities.

**How we will measure progress:**

* Track:
  + Number of students in post-high school employment programs
  + Graduation rates
  + Data on how many students get help in high school with transition to employment
  + Number of students with disabilities who take Career and Technical Education classes
  + Number off students doing work-based learning through the state Department of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation