

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Employment First is a policy that states employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age individuals.

38 States have Employment First policy.

Why is Employment First needed?

The lack of participation by people with disabilities is a major social problem. Based on the latest data, **37%** of individuals with disabilities in the United States participate in the workforce, compared to **77%** of those without disabilities. The picture in **West Virginia** is even more problematic. Among all states, **West Virginia** is last in the percentage of individuals with disabilities employed at **26%** and is also last in terms of individuals with cognitive disabilities employed, at **19%**. The end result is that too many West Virginians with disabilities are living lives of poverty, highly dependent on public benefits, impacting the quality of not only their own lives but the lives of their families, and the communities they live in. Not only is this costly in terms of the impact on individual lives and use of public resources, but in addition, in an era of increasing labor shortages, individuals with disabilities represent a major untapped labor force that can meet the needs of employers and businesses.

Employment By the Numbers	WV	US
People without disabilities employed	70%	77%
People with disabilities employed	26%*	37%
Employment gap (difference between those with and without disabilities)	44%	40%
People with cognitive disabilities employed	19%*	28%
People with disabilities living in poverty	35%**	26%
Poverty gap (difference between those with and without disabilities living in poverty)	18%**	15%

*In WV, % of people with disabilities employed in general and cognitive disabilities specifically is lowest in the U.S.

**In WV, % of people with disabilities living in poverty is the highest in the U.S., and poverty gap is the 5th highest in the U.S.

The **WV Bureau for Behavioral Health** reports that **65%** of individuals are served in facility-based and non-work settings. Only **18%** of funding is going towards integrated employment.

People with disabilities can work. The past quarter century has seen incredible advancements in the knowledge and understanding of how even those with the most significant disabilities can become successfully employed. It is clear that with the right job match in combination with the right supports, individuals who were previously considered unemployable can be successful. What is now needed is a systemic effort and alignment of resources via **Employment First**, in order to make significant advancements in the percentage of people with disabilities in the workforce.

Individuals with disabilities need different types of supports to be successfully employed.

The level and types of supports that individuals need varies. Examples of supports include:

- Highly competent professionals who can guide the individual through the job exploration and search process, negotiate with potential employers, and provide counseling and support after placement (both on and off the job)
- Accommodations and assistive technology
- Assistance with managing the impact of earnings on public benefits
- Assistance with transportation

While Employment First prioritizes competitive integrated employment, for those needing some type of publicly funded supports, **other services will still be available**. Alternatives such as non-work day programs can continue to be available. However, Employment First Makes it clear that working the general workforce is a priority over other alternatives, and that public systems should make every effort to help the person obtain competitive integrated employment.



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