



EXPECT EMPLOYMENT

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE REPORT TO THE GOVERNOR



A NOTE FROM **GOVERNOR BILL LEE**

The past few months have brought unprecedented challenges to our state. In the span of a few days, Tennesseans lost their homes and lives to the devastating tornadoes that ripped across Middle Tennessee, and we saw the first confirmed case of COVID-19 within our borders. Still today, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the lives and livelihood of Tennesseans, but we now stand together to combat the spread of the virus while safely visiting our local businesses and contributing to our economy.

As we continue to reopen and get folks back to work, it's important that we support all Tennesseans, including those with disabilities. The skills and talents individuals with disabilities can offer our workforce is immeasurable, and many business owners have seen firsthand the contributions they make to a company.

The state stands ready to assist in making connections between people with disabilities and business owners. The agencies who participate in the Employment First Task Force are still working hard through the challenges brought by the pandemic to continue this important work.

I'm proud of the work my administration has done so far to support employment efforts and help prepare youth with disabilities to transition to employment. Earlier this year, we welcomed our first group of Career Explorers to state government. These postsecondary students with intellectual and developmental disabilities had the opportunity to rotate through my office and three partner state agencies to further hone their work skills, identify their interests, and contribute to our workplaces while serving Tennessee taxpayers.

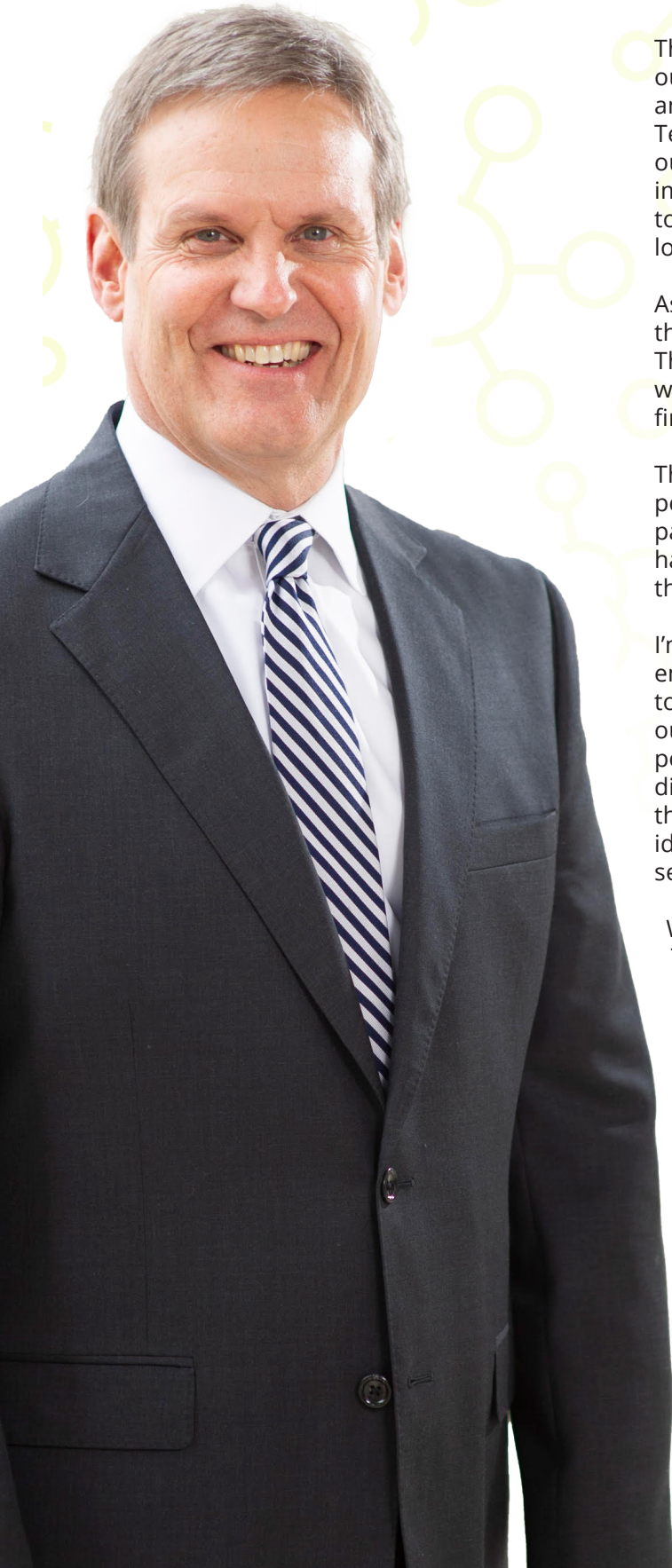
We are committed to serving our customers and supporting Tennesseans as they work to meet their employment goals, even if the work itself looks a bit different during this time. In this report, you will read of the innovative strategies state agencies have devised to offer important supports and make sure there is no pause on progress.

Thank you for all that you do to support these efforts. I am proud to see the progress we are making as we continue to make Tennessee the most welcoming state for people of all abilities.

Sincerely,



Bill Lee
Governor of Tennessee



CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY		4
GOAL ONE		6
GOAL TWO		19
GOAL THREE		24
GOAL FOUR		31
GOAL FIVE		34

APPENDIX

EMPLOYMENT FIRST
THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

EXECUTIVE ORDER
NO. 28

EMPLOYMENT FIRST
TASK FORCE MEMBERS

TASK FORCE
WORKGROUP PARTICIPANTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the year since the last Expect Employment Report was published, the state, the nation, and the entire world have changed because of the COVID-19 public health emergency. This has had a tremendous impact on the employment landscape on an international scale. Persons with disabilities have not escaped those changes, and like many others in the workforce, have experienced furlough or job loss during the past six months.

However, the work of this task force is not only unchanged but more vital than ever. Created in 2013 by Gov. Bill Haslam's Executive Order No. 28, the Employment First Task Force brings together state agencies with people, families, higher education institutions, community-based providers, and other people who are dedicated to the mission of increasing competitive integrated employment for persons with disabilities. The task force has been charged with identifying and removing barriers to employment for people with disabilities and aligning state resources to maximize funding. Eight state agencies and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities now participate in the task force meetings.

A strategic plan guides that work and the task force meets quarterly to monitor progress on that plan. The focus of that plan now includes people with not only intellectual and developmental disabilities, but also physical disabilities and people with behavioral health diagnoses, including mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and co-occurring disorders.

Last year's report was the first presented to Gov. Lee, and a primary focus was the work being done to close the employment gap between people with disabilities and people without. As mentioned above, this goal and other components of the strategic plan have been significantly impacted by the state of emergency experienced by the State of Tennessee. Oftentimes, the work to support people in refining skills, learning about different jobs, and providing job coaching is work that occurs in-person. Rather than ceasing this work in totality, this has provided many the opportunity to be innovative in how to continue to make progress. From virtual meetings to virtual reality, this changed landscape has challenged all of us to adapt in order to stay the course.

This year's report not only addresses the progress made on the strategic plan but also lays out the current employment situation. In addition, it spotlights the essential workers who have stayed on the job, the role technology has played across Tennessee, and the innovation that has been spurred during the past six months.

We are hopeful that at the end of this challenging time for the state and the nation, the Employment First Task Force will look back and see tremendous progress. Not only will it work to assist the employment numbers to rebound, but the task force expects that agencies and partners will have new tools in its toolbox to expand its efforts to more Tennesseans across the state.

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Partner Agencies

Department of
**Intellectual &
Developmental Disabilities**

Department of
**Labor & Workforce
Development**

Department of
Human Services

Department of
Education

Division of
TennCare

Department of
**Mental Health &
Substance Abuse Services**

**Council on
Developmental Disabilities**

Department of
**Economic &
Community Development**

Department of
Health

 VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

 **DISABILITY
RIGHTS TN**


The Arc.
Tennessee

GOAL **ONE** *Rundown*

Make Sure Programs for People with Disabilities Work Together.

OUTCOME: #DATA

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: We use data to know how we are doing on this goal.

Data means numbers about people with disabilities who are getting help to work. State agencies track those numbers. It helps them know if the services they provide help more people with disabilities go to work.

OUTCOME: #COORDINATION

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Building relationships helps programs work better.

It is important for leaders of disability programs to know each other and talk to each other. Those relationships help the programs work together. Here are some programs that work together now:

- **The Employment Roundtable** – The Council on Developmental Disabilities holds monthly meetings for state agencies who run employment programs.
- **Individual Placement and Support Program** – A way that mental health, vocational rehabilitation, and DIDD work together to help people get jobs.
- **Pre-Employment Transition Services** – A way that schools and vocational rehabilitation work together to help students get their first jobs before they even leave school.
- **American Job Centers** – A place where all Tennesseans can go in their local communities to get help finding a job. This includes people with disabilities.

OUTCOME: #ECF CHOICES

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: This program helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities get jobs.

- **The Employment and Community First CHOICES program** helps people with disabilities learn about their skills and the jobs in their communities. Then the program helps them find the right job for them.

OUTCOME: #WORKFORCE

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: People with disabilities need support from quality staff.

- **TennCare is leading a Statewide Workforce Development Plan.** This plan is about the staff who help people with disabilities get jobs. Those staff are called “direct support professionals.” The plan will make sure the staff are well trained and supported in their own jobs.

OUTCOME: #POLICY

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Employment services will work together better.

- **Employment and Day Services Made the Same in DIDD and ECF CHOICES:** In January 2020, DIDD made their services more like the services in ECF CHOICES so the programs work together better.

SIMPLY SCAN TO
VIEW THE VIDEO.



CARTER'S Employment at VUMC



In the midst of a global pandemic and while the rest of Tennessee was staying safe-at-home, the critical, life-saving work at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) remained essential. Carter Beatty's job was no different. While the environment and mood of the hospital was changing rapidly in Spring 2020 because of COVID-19, her enthusiasm and work ethic remained the same, strong and positive.

Carter has been employed at VUMC for more than 11 years and is now working as a Courier for the Pathology Support Department. Her job is to transfer materials between pathology departments and different labs across the Vanderbilt campus.

"It is important and it is something I like to do," Carter said. "I come in the morning. Before I clock in, I check my temperature and I come in here and I'll just say hi to all my friends. Then I go to my office and I go to do my rounds."

With a large, grey cart and multiple colorful buckets at hand, Carter moves as quick and as efficiently as she can through the halls of the hospital that are covered in reminders to social-distance, wear face masks, and wash hands. She knows time is of the essence. The Pathology support department reviews and categorizes materials from outside facilities and from various pathology departments within Vanderbilt. A patient's care can depend on how fast their team works.

"Without the pathology being reviewed quickly, what you run into is a patient coming in for an appointment, but they don't have the diagnostic answers that they need in order to treat the patient," Pam Wilson, Pathology Support Supervisor at VUMC explained. "So, it's really important that we get the material quickly and get it to the pathologist in the right areas, so that the patient's care isn't held up while we're reviewing the case."

Carter was hired right after graduating from the Project SEARCH program 12 years ago. When she graduated, the position was created for her at Vanderbilt because the department had a critical need and after showcasing her talents in previous internships there, their teams knew she would be the best candidate for the job.

"It's really been a time and personnel saver for that department. Working through the pandemic, it really shows that her work is making a difference in the hospital and she really enjoys her work and is doing a wonderful job," Brandon Pflug, Project SEARCH instructor, added. "Carter's delightful. She is such a role model for all employees at Vanderbilt."

"Everyone knows Carter and she's really been an asset to our department and I can't say enough good about her," Williams said.

Carter arrives early to work every day, ready for the challenge, and eager to brighten her colleagues and friends' day along the way. Her teamwork and passion for the job is so evident that in recent months, she also received a promotion and inherited new responsibilities. Carter says she's excited to see where her career will take her next.

"I feel like I'm growing in this job like really good. They say I'm doing a good job," Carter added. "I'm really excited for my promotion. It's very important and I do very good. So, I love it."



GOAL ONE

Align Existing and New Service Delivery Systems and Strengthen Coordination to Increase Employment Opportunities for Tennesseans with Disabilities.

OUTCOME: #DATA

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Data is how we know we are making progress.

A longstanding goal of the employment first task force is to collect and integrate employment data to understand the true employment rate for people with disabilities in Tennessee. Many state agencies collect their own employment data from various programs to understand how those programs are impacting the employment of persons served. Much of that data is maintained on the data dashboard on the TennesseeWorks website for public review.

The larger challenge has been in uniting the data, as well as recognizing that many people with disabilities across Tennessee who are working are doing so independently—without receiving employment services. Those are important steps to understand how many people with disabilities are employed.

What we do know for certain is that there is a large gap between the employment rate for people with disabilities and the rate for people without disabilities. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 33 percent of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 77 percent without disabilities who were employed. The Employment First Task Force set a goal in 2019 to close the gap. The goal is to reduce that gap by 5 percent by 2023. This means identifying the barriers that exist for people with disabilities and working together to address them. Such efforts, such as work surrounding accessible transportation are discussed later in this report.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to employment prospects across the nation, with record job losses in the spring of 2020. Just as persons with disabilities experience higher unemployment in a thriving economy, they were also heavily impacted in the COVID-19 crisis. Nationally, the employment rate for people with disabilities dropped from 32 percent to 26 percent from March to April 2020. Approximately 950,000 workers with disabilities lost their jobs in that timespan.

Agency data mirrors those trends. In March 2020, a total of 711 people supported by DIDD billed for employment services, which indicates how many people are using job coaching services for a job in the community. In April 2020, that number dropped to 174 people. There was a slight increase in May to 205 as some employers asked people to come back to work. However, it is clear that the public health emergency has deeply impacted the employment of persons with disabilities across the state.

While economists believe the economic rebound will take months or even years to return to a pre-COVID state, it's important that state agencies on Employment First Task Force continue to monitor their data and identify trends, and that the Task Force as a whole continues the work to close the gap, which may now be larger than ever.



OUTCOME: #COORDINATION

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: In-person relationship building.

EMPLOYMENT ROUNDTABLE

One of the biggest accomplishments of the state's Employment First efforts has been the increased collaboration and coordination among state agencies and private partners. Disability services and supports are spread throughout a dozen state agencies, and a person with a disability may interact with several of those agencies at the same time. Simple as it sounds, one of the biggest challenges initially was bringing those agencies to the table to streamline processes, break down silos, and connect agencies' resources.

To support those efforts and those of the Task Force, the Council on Developmental Disabilities holds monthly Employment Roundtable meetings for those state agencies who run employment programs. The goal of the roundtable meetings is for state agency leaders to share updates specifically about the state government service system. Every meeting, at least one agency shares an update that proves to be important for others in the room to know about. In addition, the meetings have directly resulted in new partnerships between agencies that better connect the state's employment system. One example of success at the Employment Roundtable was in building relationships between sensory services and other programs. Through participation in the roundtable, new awareness has been brought to the barriers faced by people who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing.

One of the major themes during the roundtable meetings was a lack of accessible, reliable transportation. This is often cited as one of the main barriers to people obtaining and maintaining employment. Since transportation funding is often county-based, the system is challenging for people who may live in one county but work in another. Rural counties often have limited to no public transportation options. Because of these factors, the Council formed a separate transportation workgroup in 2019. These meetings bring together leaders from nearly a dozen state agencies interested in accessible transportation to work side-by-side with local transportation agencies and people who rely on accessible transportation. The goal is to brainstorm and improve options in both rural and urban areas for people with disabilities.

The information shared through the transportation workgroup allowed the Council on Developmental Disabilities to provide vital input on the Accessible Transportation and Mobility Act of 2020, which passed this year. The bill formed Tennessee's first statewide Office of Accessible Transportation, which will give this issue the long-term focus and organization it needs for real change to happen.

INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Documenting and agreeing on the way we coordinate

The Council on Developmental Disabilities is the lead agency on an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) amongst 8 state agencies administering supports for youth with disabilities transitioning into the workforce.

Through the coordination of the roundtable, many partnerships have led to Memorandums of Understanding to streamline services for customers. This includes the development and revision of an MOU among state agencies who administer supports for youth with disabilities to facilitate their transition into the workforce.

Many of the established employment programs in state agencies occur in coordination with the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program, which nationwide is celebrating its 100th Anniversary. Tennessee's VR program is housed within the Division of Rehabilitation Services, which is part of the Department of Human Services. As a part of an overall agency transformation, the VR program is also looking to enhance and integrate the services provided. It continues to establish partnerships with state agencies that will improve the overall employment landscape for persons with disabilities as outlined below.



BARBARA QUINN

“It’s not enough just to offer someone treatment for their mental illness. It’s our responsibility to help them get on with their lives outside of the mental health services we provide.”

Barbara Quinn retired in April 2020 from a career in service to the mental health needs of Tennesseans. Quinn served 22 years as Executive Director at Park Center in Nashville, and she worked there for a total of 36 years. As she celebrates her retirement, Quinn looks back on the importance of employment to the people she served and her journey to Individual Placement and Support.

Park Center has been providing employment services since we first opened in 1984. I don’t know how many years it was before I attended a conference and heard someone say, “Work is a way to get healthy. You don’t have to be healthy to work.” And that’s true. I don’t know how many times we placed someone on a job that might be experiencing some symptoms, but they were able to do the job, and before long, because they were active and had a purpose, the symptoms began to dissipate. For years, I have felt like the quickest way for someone to recovery was to help them to return to work.

At some point after I became the Executive Director at Park Center, all of our employment staff happened to turn over at the same time. So I started doing some research online to see what was the latest trend in employment services, and I ran across Individual Placement and Support. When I started reading about it, what excited me the most was that there were no exclusions and that people didn’t have to jump through hoops to prove that they were capable of working. All they had to do was to have the desire to work, and then the employment specialist would immediately start working with them to find the job of their choice.

Years ago, I used to stand up at the mental health planning council and talk about how important employment was to recovery and that everybody deserved a paycheck. If there’s anything that I think every CEO of a mental health agency needs to hear is that they need to offer employment services. It’s not enough just to offer someone treatment for their mental illness. It’s our responsibility to help them get on with their lives outside of the mental health services we provide.



IPS PROVIDER Q&A

RYAN LLOYD

Employment Resource Unit Leader

AIM Center

Chattanooga

HOW DOES WORK GENERALLY, AND IPS SPECIFICALLY, BENEFIT THE PEOPLE YOU SUPPORT?

For us at AIM Center, work represents independence. When a member gets a chance to work, it opens up countless opportunities that they might not have otherwise. For many members of the AIM Center, work is often a stepping stone to independent living, learning to manage money, learning to ride the bus, and so much more. For many people with severe and persistent mental illness, most of their lives are spent around other people with mental illness and paid professionals. Getting to work is a chance to finally be fully integrated into society and can provide a sense of normalcy.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU ENCOUNTER IN JOB DEVELOPMENT AND MATCHING A PERSON TO THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY?

One of the core aspects of IPS is to ensure that we help our members find the job that is right for them. It is also equally important to ensure that the member is a good fit for the business in which they are employed. It can be challenging at times to ensure that all placements are mutually beneficial to both the employer and the job seeker.

HOW DOES SUPPORT FROM VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION ENABLE PEOPLE TO ATTAIN AND MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT?

Vocational Rehabilitation is a great partner with our IPS program. They add an additional person to the support system for the member who is working or looking for work. They are also another person who can brainstorm resources that a member may need.

HOW DOES THE IPS MODEL WORK FOR PEOPLE WITH BOTH A MENTAL ILLNESS AND AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

AIM Center has had several members over the years participate in IPS who have both a mental illness and an intellectual disability. While mental illness and intellectual disabilities present themselves very differently, the IPS model is successful in helping people who are dually diagnosed with finding competitive and integrated employment in the community.

HOW HAVE YOU ADAPTED YOUR APPROACH AND SERVICES TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19?

During COVID-19, all IPS supports have become remote. Our employment specialists are in regular contact with our members via phone to support them in their job and their overall wellbeing during such a difficult and trying time. The AIM Center also has been hosting Zoom meetings with all members (IPS and non-IPS members) to support them in their jobs.

IF YOU HAD TO BOIL THE VALUE OF WORK TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES DOWN TO A SINGLE SENTENCE, PHRASE, OR IDEA, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

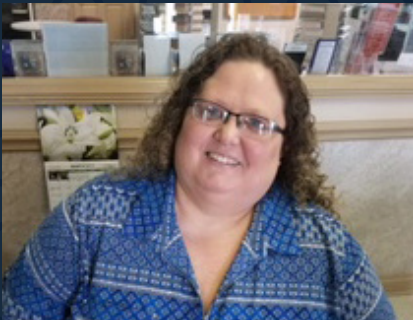
Work equals freedom!

OUTCOME: #COORDINATION CONTINUED **INDIVIDUAL PLACEMENT AND SUPPORT (IPS) PROGRAM**

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Coordination in practice between Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation, and DIDD.

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Vocational Rehabilitation work together on the Individual Placement and Support Program, a supported employment model that has been widely successful in placing individuals with a mental health diagnosis and or substance use disorder in competitive integrated employment. The two departments have been working under a 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that strengthened the partnership between the two agencies and positioned the program to experience even more growth. A new interagency agreement has been created and signed in 2020 to further that success. This past year was a year that saw an increase in persons served in the program and an increase in those who were able to maintain their employment for 90 days or longer. The program has served this fiscal year 1,118 people with a 49 percent job placement rate. Of those who found competitive integrated employment through the program, 57 percent remained on the job for 90 days or more. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the IPS community like most people in Tennessee, but despite the challenges, there were 122 job placements that occurred between March and June 2020.

In addition, continued expansion of IPS is one of the objectives for the VOICE grant from the United States Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. This includes support for the pilot IPS programs with two community providers targeted at those with a dual diagnosis of a mental health disorder and intellectual disability. There are also more pilots that have been developed to increase the IPS footprint across the state including those receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid benefits.



PARTNERSHIP DURING PANDEMIC

SUCCESS STORY

The Importance of Partnerships During a Pandemic

Although the current pandemic has dramatically changed the way Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has always done business, Tammie Winningham, a VR Counselor in Crossville TN, has not allowed it to take away her dedication to her customers. She has stayed connected to the schools and students that she works with and has virtually attended 9 IEP meetings during the month of April and 13 during the month of May. Jabber and Zoom were utilized for the meetings that occurred for Van Buren County High School and Monterey High School.

Two students who obtained employment at Middle TN Construction are currently working in Nashville. Due to their work schedule, they weren't available to meet until after work. Tammie, the Special Education Teacher, Principal, and another teacher from Monterey High School accommodated these student's schedules and completed the IEP meetings for them in the evenings, beginning at 7 PM at night. When asked how she was invited and able to participate in these meetings, Tammie stated, "It is all about the relationships that you make with the schools and that benefits the students."

During these meetings, Tammie provides information on Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC) Smyrna services, the Employment and Community First CHOICES Program, Job Readiness and Placement Services, Driver's Training assistance, On the Job Training, WIOA collaboration and programs available, TCAT and the importance of getting on the waitlist if a student wishes to apply for TCAT, and the flow of a VR Case.

Tammie stated, "I focused on ensuring that the student knows we do everything in our ability to assist them with obtaining and maintaining employment".



OUTCOME: #COORDINATION CONTINUED

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Coordination in practice between The Department of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation.

Another area of focus is on youth transitioning out of the school system and ensuring they are prepared for employment. As part of the state plan for the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), several state agencies work together to ensure that transition work in the school system starts as early as the age of 14 for youth with disabilities. One of the ways this is done is using Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). This partnership includes Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Education, and Local Education Agencies (LEA) to make available five services for students that will help set expectations and lay the foundation for the transition into employment after school.

Even with a year where in-person attendance was shortened substantially by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Pre-ETS used statewide still showed year-over-year growth. As of the end of May, the number of Pre-ETS provided was 56,391 during the 2019-2020 school year, up from 42,616 the previous academic year. To further promote Pre-ETS, the state has partnered with Vanderbilt University and Vanderbilt Kennedy Center on a portal on the Transition Tennessee site (see more in Goal 5) that focuses specifically on Pre-ETS. The hub provides courses with video modules, including interviews with providers who are doing the work in schools and the community, and other resources to continue professional development on these services. Over the past year, two additional courses were added on the provider portal focused on Connecting with Families and Employers and Instruction in Self-Advocacy. Additional courses will be added that focus on Interagency Collaboration, Managing Instruction, and the remaining four pre-employment transition services.

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN JOB CENTERS

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Establishing stronger coordination between the broader workforce system and the disability service system.

A key component of WIOA was to connect disability employment efforts with the broader workforce system. One major area of focus was on improving the delivery of services to people with disabilities at the American Job Centers (AJC) located in every county of the state.

Through a partnership with the Department of Human Services and the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the AJC's are able to assist people with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training Program, including people with disabilities. This program helps people who receive SNAP (food benefits) with resources to further their success in attaining vocational goals and decrease the reliance on community resources. With the combination of resources and collaboration with multiple partnerships, the chance of successful placement in meaningful work, and the individual's ability to retain the work has also increased. These partnerships may also include community-based organizations and employers who find value in utilizing the federal resources and highly recommended talent pool to recruit future employees.

Enrollments into the SNAP Employment and Training program have increased by 15 percent in the past year, many through the partnerships with AJC, community-based organizations, and employers.



CODY'S STORY

At 23 years old, Cody Ranta was supporting two children with a very low income. He was working as an equipment operator averaging only 25 hours per week and many times would be out of work due to bad weather. Cody wanted a more secure career with full-time employment and benefits for his family. So, he began to pursue a career as a truck driver.

Cody met with the Campbell County Title 1 (WIOA) for assistance with CDL Truck Driving Training. He was enrolled with Title 1 in the Out-of-School Youth Program for training at the Tennessee College of Applied Technology in Knoxville but needed some assistance for tuition and textbook costs. He was referred to SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) and was enrolled by phone for the convenience of the client and to expedite the process to secure funding.



Through SNAP E&T, Cody's tuition and textbook costs were covered and he received transportation assistance and monthly case management through Title 1. Cody completed his training at TCAT and earned his CDL A and obtained employment with McElroy Trucking Company based in Cuba, Alabama. He began earning \$15 per hour for 40 to 50 hours per week and still receives Job Retention Assistance from SNAP E&T.

Cody can now provide for his young family with a stable, full-time job with benefits. There will be no shortage of future work in this field. The close communication between Title 1, SNAP E&T, and DHS and their prompt responses made it possible for this Cody to go from struggling to secure employment in just a few months.

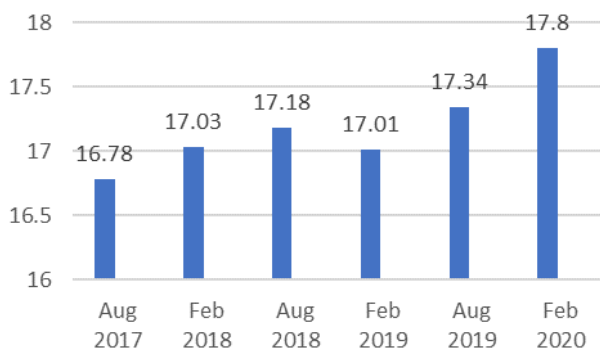
OUTCOME: #ECF CHOICES

The Employment and Community First CHOICES program was launched in July 2016, as the first program in the nation with a primary focus of employment and independence for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The program placed a strong emphasis on providing pre-employment services called Exploration and Discovery, which help people with disabilities learn about what a job in the community might look like, various types of employment, and how a person's individual skills and abilities can contribute to the workforce.

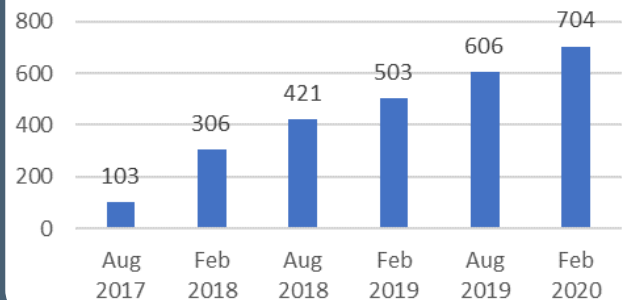
Since 2016, the program has grown to support over 3,000 people across Tennessee. Further, the program has achieved success in increasing the number of persons in the program who are employed. In February 2018, approximately 17 percent of working-age persons in the program had a job in the community. Two years later, that has grown to more than 27 percent. In addition, wages and hours worked have also increased.

Collaboration across state agencies and beyond to stakeholders throughout the delivery system has been key to successes in Employment and Community First CHOICES, workforce development initiatives, and other system transformation efforts. Additionally, TennCare hosts several forums annually to solicit feedback from program participants, family members, and other stakeholders on programmatic or policy changes necessary to better support employment goals.

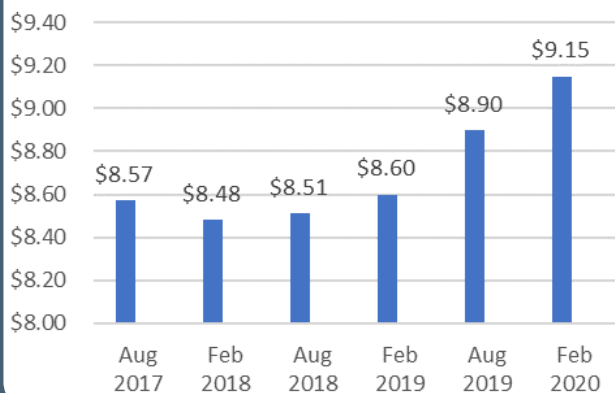
Average Hours Worked



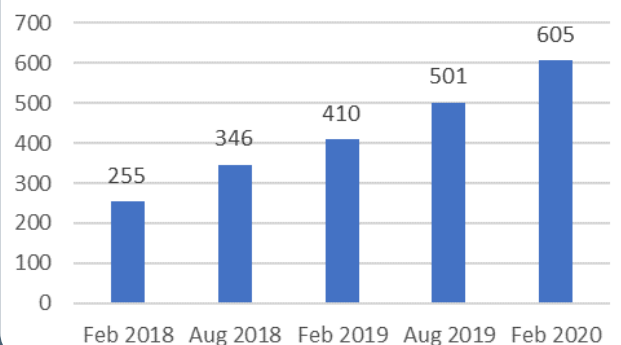
Total Number of Employed ECF CHOICES Members



Average Wage



Total Number of Employed ECF CHOICES of Working Age (22-62)



OUTCOME: #WORKFORCE

Tennessee recognizes that attracting, recruiting, and retaining a high-quality and dedicated workforce of direct support professionals (DSPs) is essential to supporting people with disabilities in achieving employment goals. The progress and achievements in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program to date are a result of collaboration across agencies and stakeholder communities, including dedicated DSPs. A stable, competent DSP workforce is critical for the delivery of home and community-based services for people with disabilities to access, live, and work in the community, including employment services and personal services that assist people with disabilities seek and retain employment. However, a shortage of qualified DSPs could potentially impact the positive momentum achieved to date in Employment and Community First CHOICES. While many states across the country are experiencing a shortage of DSPs, Tennessee is taking a proactive approach to invest in the DSP workforce. Multiple agencies have been working together on a Tennessee-specific plan to increase the number of high-quality support professionals.

To better understand the true scope of the issue in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program, TennCare distributed the Employment and Community First CHOICES Workforce QuILTSS Initiative Survey in 2019. This represents the first summary of data from 47 providers regarding their workforce that provides home and community-based services and supports. There were 8,703 Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in the 47 organizations who responded to the 2018 survey. The 2018 report signals significant and widespread challenges that organizations in Tennessee are facing in recruiting, hiring, and retaining sufficient DSPs to meet this demand. There was a 46% DSP turnover rate in 2018 and a 15% vacancy rate. This means that nearly half of the DSP workforce left their positions that year, and about one out of every seven DSP positions are vacant. This results in unstable and limited services for people with disabilities and great difficulties for organizations that employ DSPs to create a stable culture that supports DSPs. An important part of this TennCare Workforce Development Initiative is to work alongside participating organizations to better interpret and use data as outlined in the report to identify key areas for improvement, gather further data and information about the nature of the challenges faced, and address workforce challenges in a targeted manner toward those that can have the greater impact with minimal resources. Obtaining data is the first step in a much more comprehensive plan designed to address DSP workforce challenges. The 2019 annual survey was launched in January 2020 and closed in April 2020 and has collected a second year of data.

TennCare is leading the development of a Statewide Workforce Development Plan that will integrate and align individual Workforce Development Plans developed by each Managed Care Organization for their contracted provider workforce. The plans will outline measurable actions to help ensure a qualified, competent, and sufficient workforce to consistently deliver needed services in a timely manner. MCO Workforce Development (WFD) Plans will be developed in collaboration with providers, persons receiving services, and their families, as well as other stakeholders, industry, education, and community groups. The WFD Plans will describe goals, objectives, tasks, and timelines to develop the provider workforce and are targeted for an October 2020 implementation.

Understanding the data is one part of the solution, increasing the competency is another. To that end, a 501(c)(3) – The QuILTSS Institute – has been created to house the competency-based workforce development and training components of TennCare's workforce initiative. The competency-based training program is expected for future statewide implementation with vocational and technical schools and colleges across the state and allows for remote access through online formats. Participants will be eligible for Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect funding to earn the post-secondary credential, contributing to the Governor's Drive to 55 goal. This initiative aims to develop a robust and well-trained pool of quality DSPs who may continue on with direct support work or who may advance their careers through college credit.

To further support the work and ensure a greater wage for direct support professionals, the Tennessee General Assembly completed its commitment to providing funding for a 10 dollar average hourly wage for direct support professionals in the waivers operated by DIDD. Furthermore, the department's East Planning and Policy Council has compiled a toolkit for the DIDD website to assist persons who are contemplating a career as a DSP to understand what the job entails and the rewards.

ASHLEY HOLMES

Ashley's mom always reminded her that she could do things everyone does and that her disability does not define her. When Ashley first began in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program, she was shy and often felt as though she needed to ask for permission before doing something. Once she began Discover services through Support Solutions, she became more confident in herself and started to increase her independence. Following her work through Discovery Service, Ashley was able to land a job at Marshall's Department Store!

Support Solutions continued to coach Ashley to almost full independence. But she still wanted additional supports to take her position to the next level and began Job Coaching services. Ashley's job coach coached her on how to advocate for herself and request additional hours from her supervisor. She spoke independently with her supervisor and began working more hours. Ashley now advocates for herself and has earned several raises. She loves her job and her interaction with her co-workers.



AUBREY LANGLEY

When Aubrey Langley first began his employment journey in the Employment and Community First program, he struggled to maintain employment for more than six months. His first job was at a bustling restaurant preparing food and cleaning. Aubrey quickly discovered the loud atmosphere was overstimulating for him, causing panic attacks and missed shifts. Aubrey continued to struggle to maintain employment and began utilizing the Career Advancement supports through the Michael Dunn Center. He was determined to find his dream job.

Through the Career Advancement supports, Aubrey expressed his passion for animals and was able to find an employer that could meet his needs and allow him to work with animals. In December 2019, Aubrey began his job at a veterinary clinic where he is currently employed as a full-time veterinary assistant. His responsibilities at the clinic include administering medication to the animals, grooming, and cleaning kennels. Aubrey is passionate about his work and much happier with his career path. He can maintain his current employment and no longer needs the support of Employment and Community First CHOICES.





BRITTANY BOWMAN

Innovation in using employment services to pursue higher education and a professional career.

Brittany Bowman began her time in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program as a student at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree. During her time as a student, she utilized consumer-directed transportation services to help her with tasks such as getting groceries and attending class. She also used the personal care services for activities of daily living such as washing her hair and doing her makeup.

Brittany continued her work as a student and later obtained her master's degree in Social Work. After graduation, she moved to Maryville, TN, where she currently works full time at the Helen Ross McNabb Center as a social worker. Brittany has become more independent and has been able to reduce her personal care services. She also has purchased her own car and drives herself to and from work. Brittany is continuing to further her career and will take her LMSW exam for medical social worker licensure.

Brittany's hard work and dedication to her independence coupled with the support of ECF CHOICES, she has been able to pursue higher education and a professional career in social work.

OUTCOME: #POLICY

DIDD EMPLOYMENT AND DAY SERVICES CHANGES

The Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities supports approximately 7,200 people in three waivers for people with intellectual disabilities. As employment services have transformed from a model that primarily involved sheltered workshops to prioritizing competitive integrated employment, the department has been recognized as a national leader in Employment First. A next step in that transformation was to further align the services and supports people receive to ensure they are targeted to achieve their employment outcomes.

In January, after more than two years of careful planning and communication, DIDD implemented new employment and day services to further the goals of increased employment, increased hours worked, and incentivize the fading of on-the-job supports. This included bringing pre-employment services called Exploration, Discovery, and Job Development to the menu of available services. These services provide pathways for people who may not know if they want in a job in the community to explore the different possibilities and learn how their skills and interest can contribute to the workforce. Further services allow for greater flexibility and emphasize community engagement, further drivers for improving employment outcomes.

While the public health emergency created by COVID-19 has created new challenges in providing these services, it's also provided new opportunities. Before the state of emergency, the pre-employment services often involved visiting different job sites and required training in-person. Now, DIDD is utilizing its experience in the Enabling Technology program and working to develop virtual reality content for people with disabilities. This content will assist them in learning about different jobs, provide them with on-the-job scenarios, and other skills training. This will provide a private, less stressful environment to learn about work while also reducing possible exposure to COVID-19.

BRYAN ARCHILLA

Bryan Archilla first began to explore employment opportunities through his high school, although he never earned a wage. In September 2016, Bryan joined the Employment and Community First CHOICES program and started his first paid job at Aubrey's where he measured and restocked food. Later he worked at Walgreen's stocking shelves but was not fulfilled in his role. In December 2016, Bryan began Discovery Supports through the Cerebral Palsy Center and later enrolled in Integrated Employment Path Services to further develop his skills.

Bryan continued to develop his skills, apply for jobs, and work on increasing his stamina and landed part-time employment at an upscale sushi restaurant. He has worked at the restaurant since November 2019 and currently works as a server's assistant. Although Bryan still utilizes job coaching supports through the Cerebral Palsy Center, he is now able to complete tasks with less assistance from his job coach. Bryan's employer did have to close due to COVID-19, but Bryan is excited to return to work and continue his job with fading job coaching supports.



ROBERT LEE

At 39 years old, Robert Lee entered the Employment and Community First CHOICES program as a homeless man, residing at the Knox Area Rescue Ministry with no natural supports. In the beginning, Robert's outlook on life was not very positive and he was reluctant to accept any support. He expressed dreams of having a job and living independently when he first met his Employment and Community First CHOICES Support Coordinator.

Robert's support coordinator began assisting him in securing Personal Assistance services through the Disability Resource Center and complete applications for housing. Robert was insistent on living alone due to past challenges with roommates. He was able to find an apartment in South Knoxville where he lived independently for a year. Robert continued to receive services that helped him with social skills and how to address individuals respectfully and courteously in the community. Although Robert was gaining more independence, he knew things could still be better. Living on his own wasn't all that he had hoped for.

After multiple conversations, Robert's Support Coordinator assisted him in moving into a Community Living Supports (CLS) home where he would receive additional supports and live with a roommate. While skeptical at first, Robert was happy with his decision to move to the Community Living Supports home and have a roommate! But there was still one goal he had yet to accomplish – employment.

In collaboration with his Support Coordinator and Vocational Rehabilitation, Robert worked hard applying for jobs, connecting with employers, and learning new employable skills. In July 2019, he landed his first job at Burger King.

Robert works 20 hours a week and is an essential member to the Burger King team. He takes pride in his job and enjoys going to work every day. Robert has found that not only does he enjoy living with his roommates, but he has been able to gain their respect and often uses his cooking skills from work to make meals for his friends and roommates at home.

When looking back on his journey of employment and living independently, Robert says, "I am a changed man."



GOAL **TWO** *Rundown*

Make Sure Everyone in Tennessee Cares about Employment for People with Disabilities.

OUTCOME: #COMMUNICATION

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:

The public learns more about the great work people with disabilities can do.

- **Employment First Communications Subgroup** – Staff from several groups get together. They plan how to share stories and messages. The stories show people with disabilities across Tennessee working in great jobs.

OUTCOME: #ADVOCATES #FAMILIES

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:

People can get together and learn great ideas about work for people with disabilities..

- **Think Employment Summit** – A group called TennesseeWorks hosts a big event in three parts of Tennessee. People come together to talk about employment for people with disabilities. The event is called the Think Employment Summit. Everyone is invited:
 - students and adults with disabilities,
 - employers, community members,
 - advocates and
 - disability professionals.

OUTCOME: #COMMUNITY

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:

Events get people excited and help spread good ideas about work for people with disabilities.

- **Disability Rights TN Luncheon** – Every year, Disability Rights Tennessee hosts a big event. It celebrates people with disabilities and their employers. Everyone eats lunch together. Speakers tell stories about why employment is important for people with disabilities.
- **Enabling Technology Summit** – DIDD hosts a big event about how technology can help people with disabilities. Speakers show how technology is helping people do things for themselves, including work.

GOAL TWO

Build a shared commitment to Employment First for individuals with disabilities.

OUTCOME: #COMMUNICATION

EMPLOYMENT FIRST COMMUNICATIONS SUBGROUP

In 2015, communications professionals from the participating agencies on the Employment First Taskforce started a subgroup. The goal of the group was to unite messaging on Employment First and leverage all available partnerships and communications channels to amplify the voices involved. The group meets quarterly and works to share content throughout the year on disability-employment related programs. It also provides more targeted messaging and collaboration around large events, including Disability Day on the Hill and the Tennessee Disability MegaConference.

This year, the group was able to share several successful videos about people with disabilities reaching their employment goals. It includes people who are supported by both DIDD and Employment and Community First CHOICES who work at Discovery Parks of America in Union City, a story from the Council on Developmental Disabilities about a man who contributes to his local John Deere dealership, a young woman who leads group fitness classes at her YMCA and video stories about how Vocational Rehabilitation assisted folks to go to college, start businesses and find jobs across the state.

In addition, both the Council on Developmental Disabilities' Breaking Ground magazine and the "Rise to Work" blog on the TennesseeWorks website continues to promote Employment First efforts. Breaking Ground featured many employment-focused stories in the past year, including stories about the Tennessee Business Enterprise, the UHC Pathways internship program, and how Enabling Technology is supporting people at on the job. The "Rise to Work" Blog included pieces about how siblings can support people with disabilities in employment, the move to eliminate subminimum wages, the use of mobile-based applications, and how they can support people with disabilities.

Another employment-related communications effort is a new podcast hosted on the TennesseeWorks website by Naveh Eldar, BlueCare's Employment Specialist. "The Landscape" is about people, programs and businesses changing the landscape for individuals with any type of disability. Recent podcasts have featured the Vice President of Best Buddies International, discussion about Microsoft as an inclusive employer for people with disabilities, and Project SEARCH.

Every year, the primary focus of the subgroup is on the widespread promotion of National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October. The primary focus is on the "Hire My Strengths" campaign developed by TennesseeWorks in 2015. This social media campaign aims to spotlight the individual strengths and skills people bring to their jobs every day, particularly the strengths that can make people with disabilities an asset to an employer. This year, participation in the campaign continued across the state.

Finally, the work of the Employment First Task Force culminates in the presentation of the Expect Employment Report to the Governor every fall. This year, that event took place in Jackson at West Tennessee Healthcare. Not only does West Tennessee Healthcare serve as a site for the Project SEARCH program, but also has a highly successful Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program as well. Gov. Bill Lee toured the hospital and learned the various roles students with disabilities perform and the work skills they learn during on-the-job training. He then received his first report from a graduate of the program who is now a current employee in front of approximately 250 people: all who are invested in the Employment First movement. This is a sign of how much this movement has grown in the past seven years and the champions who have been created during that time.





SIMPLY SCAN TO
VIEW THE VIDEO



AMBER'S Employment at YMCA



A “3,2,1” is shouted and everyone in the packed room at YMCA of East TN’s afternoon class looks up to see which exercise routine Amber Griffis will move on to next. She and her job coach, Jane Smith, grab a quick sip of water, pick up a purple weight ball, and with a smile, instruct the class on which low-impact movement they’ll be counting down to next. The class, smiling back, matches her energy and follows closely along to the beat of the fast, loud music.

“Whatever the lead instructor is doing, Amber can do it at a lower impact. In other words, if they have to sit down, Amber can show them how to do it sitting down,” Jane Smith, ECF Job Coach at Adult Community Training, explained. “Any class she’s ever taught or helped teach, they absolutely adore her.”

Amber has worked as an Assistant Instructor and Trainer at the Y near Knoxville, TN for nearly two years. When Amber was asked if she loves the job, she nodded and said, “Yes, there’s independence and more opportunity.”

The job takes rhythm, athleticism, and leadership skills. It was those skills that friends, family, and fellow employees had seen in Amber for years and that ultimately landed her the position. Through the ECF Program and the support of Adult Community Training, Amber utilized Discovery to identify her interests and career goals. Before her employment, she had been attending classes, enjoying workouts, and building friendships at the same YMCA. It was clear for Amber that her passion was in fitness and dance.

“Amber is very capable of doing anything she wants to do. She’s a take-charge kind of gal and she is just a joy to have working with us here at the Y,” said Pam Williams, VP of Membership.

Once her first class is over, Amber wipes the sweat from her brow and gets another drink of water before heading to the indoor pool. From there, she and the lead instructor, Donna, stand at the corner of the pool where a swimmer is awaiting instruction in the cool, blue water. As the swimmer takes off, Amber and Donna walk the sides of the pool for the next hour watching and directing from above on how to improve their strokes. “That’s it! You’re doing it,” Amber yells to the student swimmer. “Awesome!”

Amber’s colleagues and supervisors say it’s her enthusiasm and kindness that keeps members coming back. “Our members have fallen in love with her,” Williams concluded. “We’re thrilled to have Amber on our staff.”

OUTCOME: #ADVOCATES #FAMILIES

THINK EMPLOYMENT SUMMIT

This past year marked the return of the highly successful Think Employment Summit, with a new twist. In previous years, the summit was held in Nashville, which oftentimes limited student and self-advocate participation to the Middle Tennessee area. These summits not only provide an opportunity to connect people with disabilities to agency leaders, but it also helps them forge a connection with their peers and learn the benefits of employment. In 2019, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center held its first regional Think Employment summit in Knoxville. More than 100 people came to learn more from presentations focused on families, educators, and pre-ETS services. These summits, keeping a focus on regional attendees, will resume in early 2021.



OUTCOME: #COMMUNITY

DISABILITY RIGHTS TN LUNCHEON

In October, Disability Rights Tennessee hosted its 6th annual Disability Employment Awareness Luncheon at the Music City Center in Nashville. This event brought together over 300 stakeholders from the nonprofit, government, and business sectors to increase awareness of and commitment to Employment First as a sustainable business policy and to learn how to build inclusive workforces. This year, self-advocates, business leaders, and family members spoke to a captivated audience sharing their inclusion success stories and tips for business leaders. Gov. Lee also attended the event and shared his vision for employment for all Tennesseans.

ENABLING TECHNOLOGY SUMMIT

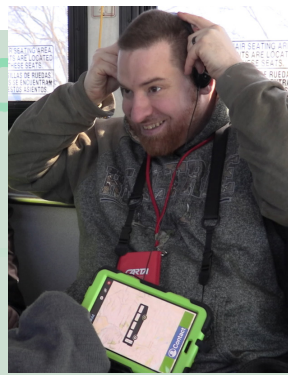
DIDD's Enabling Technology initiative is now in its third year, and dozens of people across Tennessee are now living and working more independently with the support of technology. In the area of employment, that could mean a mobile application that helps provide prompts for job tasks or assists a person in communicating with his colleagues. For the third year, DIDD held its annual Enabling Technology Summit in Nashville. 200 people, including IDD agencies from other states, came to listen to sessions about emerging technologies, state successes and lessons learned through technology, the national landscape for Enabling Technology, and how technology plays a role in solving the state's workforce crisis. In addition, people supported, providers and other stakeholders had the opportunity to interact with vendors about how people can be supported on the worksite. Finally, attendees had the opportunity to tour DIDD's Tech Home, which not only showcases various technologies in residential settings but how those can be utilized on a worksite as well.



KENNY'S STORY

Enabling Technology

Promoting Employment



Enabling Technology continues to open doors for people with disabilities at home, in the community, and at the workplace. For many, unaffordable or inaccessible transportation can be a major barrier for getting or keeping a job. But through strong public-private partnerships across the state, Tennessee is creating innovative opportunities to increase independence and break down those barriers.

In Chattanooga, Kenny Pittman has been working at Barger Academy without any staff support, but he had still been relying on family or community provider Orange Grove Center to get to and from work each day. "I live a long way," Kenny said, and when asked if he likes his job and what he likes about it? He said, "Yeah! Money."

He and his family wanted to find a way for Kenny to get to work on his own and on time in a safe, cost-effective, and efficient way. His grandmother, Mary Pittman, adds, "Kenny, he's my life. He's a great kid. He's a hard worker. He don't want to miss work. He can't stand the idea."

In January 2020, DIDD, the City of Chattanooga, CARTA, Orange Grove Center and AbleLink Smart Living Technologies, LLC, kickstarted the groundbreaking Technology Supported Community Inclusion initiative. It's designed to support people with disabilities in Hamilton County to navigate public transportation independently using technology. Kenny was chosen as its first participant.

"It's going to give him some independence. It is going to give him some freedom to kind of make some decisions on his own and be able to travel wherever he needs to go," Alana Shores, a CARTA Travel Trainer, explained.

The pilot program uses AbleLink's WayFinder SMART Travel system, a mobile application specifically designed for people with disabilities. The app provides photo and video prompts on a tablet to direct Kenny to safely navigate the CARTA transit system.

Before using it on his own, support staff and a CARTA travel trainer spent weeks practicing the route to ensure the technology and scheduled transit would work well for him.

"Being with Kenny is a great way to start out your morning. He normally has us laughing at the bus stop before we start. Our main focus is safety. We can track Kenny, if he gets off the course," Shores said, "I can see how important this is and how life-changing it is going to be for so many individuals, not just Kenny."

After hopping on the CARTA bus at stop closer to home, the tablet let's Kenny know when he's approaching his last stop, when and where to pull the cord to alert the driver that he needs to hop off, and which signs and businesses he should be looking for as he walks from the stop to his workplace across the street. He has to acknowledge each of those prompts. The app also utilizes GPS tracking, emergency contact buttons, and other tools to get Kenny where he needs to be. Once he arrives, the tablet displays a photo of his workplace and announces, "Great job Kenny, Barger school is on your left and you have made it to work. Have a great day."

"I think it is going to help a lot. It is something great for him and at first I was real nervous about it because I thought about safety, you know, more than anything," Kenny's grandmother added. "He has come a long way. I'm proud of him."

At least 5 more candidates have been identified to participate in the initiative. The pilot program is funded through DIDD's Enabling Technology program with the goal of offering the use of the technology to any person with a disability in Chattanooga and Hamilton County to continue expanding access to gainful employment and promoting independence.



SIMPLY SCAN TO
VIEW THE VIDEO.

GOAL **THREE** *Rundown*

Make Sure More Employers Hire People With Disabilities.

OUTCOME: #BUSINESS

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:

Working with businesses helps make more jobs for people with disabilities.

- **State government hires businesses owned by people with disabilities** – There is a program in state government that helps businesses owned by people with disabilities. The program is called The Governor's Office of Diversity Business Enterprise.
- **Vocational Rehabilitation Business Services Unit (BSU)** – This group in state government talks to Tennessee businesses. It helps them learn why they should hire people with disabilities. Then it helps them do it.
- **Project SEARCH** – This program is a way schools and vocational rehabilitation work with businesses. Students get help to work at those businesses while they are still in school. This helps them be ready to work when they are done with school.



EMPLOYMENT AT DISCOVERY PARK IN UNION CITY

SIMPLY SCAN TO
VIEW THE VIDEO.



Nestled between farmland and rural Union City is a unique and standout attraction like no other in West Tennessee. On what used to be a corn field, The Discovery Park of America was built to offer locals and travelers alike a distinctive educational and entertaining experience. The park is full of off quirky exhibits, dinosaur fossils, replicas, views of the surrounding nature, and a cozy lunch spot that's embracing competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities. It's called Sabin's Café.

"Sabin's has been great to hire our guys and allow the job coach to come in. We come in and we help collaborate with ECF CHOICES and DIDD and it's been good for our individuals and it's been good for them," Cori Schroeder, Business Employment Consultant TN Dept. of Human Services said.

When Sabin's Cafe owners Connie and Johnny Babb saw the success of another Tennessee business hiring people with disabilities, they immediately decided to incorporate people of all varying abilities into the staff of their restaurant. They reached out to St. John's Community Services (SJCS) and now 3 of their employees, Donald, Levi, and Chris, are working in various areas of the café.

"It is so cool. I do the dishes. I do like to work out here all the time and just walk around and see a lot of faces. I love to come in and make people happy," Levi said excitedly.

"It's a good place to work. I clean and mop the floors, wipe off the tables and around the base," Donald added. "I'll do it!"

The partnerships between DIDD, SJCS, the Department of Human Services, and Sabin's Café has been crucial to the success of the employment opportunities. Together, they worked with Vocational Rehabilitation services to identify each employee's strength, where their skills could be applied, and what each of their goals are for work.

"I like cleaning tables and taking the dishes back. I do almost everything," Chris explained. "I'm just trying to be able to work for myself and try to make a little bit money for myself. I like this place because it's a beautiful place."

"Mrs. Connie has been awesome. The atmosphere is wonderful here. They have so many opportunities to grow. They're very hard workers," Kim Smith, Supported Employment Specialist, St. John's Community Services said.

Connie and Johnnie say they're grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with the state and SJCS to support their business model and they look forward to continuing to work with each of their employees to provide the best customer service experience at Discovery Park.

"They do a great job. Ask them to do something, show them to do it and they just take the bull by the horns and do a good job and we couldn't ask for better guys," Johnnie Babb said. "Just glad they're here."

GOAL THREE

Increase the number of businesses and employers throughout the state who actively seek and hire individuals with disabilities.

OUTCOME: #BUSINESS

PROMOTING DISABILITY-OWNED BUSINESSES

Supporting businesses owned and operated by people with disabilities is an important part of increasing not only business employment but business ownership. People with Disabilities were added to the State of Tennessee's Diversity Program by legislation effective July 1, 2017. The minority-owned, woman-owned, service-disabled veteran-owned and small business procurement and contracting act was amended to now include persons with disabilities according to T.C.A. 12-3-1101-1107.

The Governor's Office of Diversity Business Enterprise is responsible for expanding economic opportunities to businesses owned by minorities, women, individuals with disabilities, service-disabled veteran-owned, and small business enterprises.

The process of identifying businesses owned by these business sectors include education and training on how to do business with the State of Tennessee, registration to the State of Tennessee's procurement portal called "Edison", verification, assessment and certification of businesses owned by minorities, women, individual with disabilities, service-disabled veteran-owned businesses, and small business enterprises. These businesses desire to compete successfully for procurement contracts and awards for the purchase of goods, supplies, equipment, construction, design, and engineering, including personal professional service contracts.

The office is further charged with assisting state agencies and departments with establishing and achieving their agency's internal goals for the utilization of diversity owned businesses.

With the goal in mind to expand economic opportunities to businesses owned by individuals with disabilities, we have certified two businesses owned by persons with disabilities.

The first business was certified in 2018. A transportation company located in Nashville, TN. U-Matter provides transportation services to individuals with disabilities. A second firm was added to the program in May of 2020. Robinson Garden Center is a landscaping company out of Memphis, TN.

Outreach efforts continue to expand opportunities to individuals with disabilities. Increases in the number of newly certified businesses are promising entering the new fiscal year with one new applicant as a result of virtual training workshops being conducted statewide.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY OUTREACH

In order to increase employment for people with disabilities, it is essential that businesses understand the skills a person with a disability can bring to the job, along with the increases company-wide to morale and productivity that businesses often see. That's where employer engagement is a huge driver for many state agencies as they connect with local companies and large corporations to make the case for employment.

Many state agencies continue their work to develop relationships with businesses and take a person-centered approach to match those they support with potential jobs. As state programs to assist in employment grow larger, there are more relationships developed with employers.



ALEXANDRIA TAYLOR

TN SECRETARY OF STATE HIRES ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria Taylor was able to pursue a degree in Independent Studies at MTSU through Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). After obtaining her degree, Alexandria was referred to Natalie Boyd, a Business Employment Consultant (BEC) with the Business Services Unit (BSU), for job placement assistance after graduation. Alexandria was looking for an administrative assistant position. Mrs. Boyd sent job leads and advised Alexandria to look at jobs with the State of TN. It took some time, but Alexandria secured a position as a Business Services Officer I with the Business Services Division in the Office of Tennessee's Secretary of State. Alex is loving her job.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY OUTREACH CONTINUED

One area to note is that the Vocational Rehabilitation BSU has been steadily expanding its collaborations with businesses throughout Tennessee. Since many agency employment programs partner with VR, this unit provides a critical service that is felt in many different programs. In West Tennessee, staff have been making great strides, connecting to businesses to increase awareness of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and identify ways to partner and assist local businesses with their hiring needs, as well as to educate them on the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities. To date, the West Region BSU has connected with 181 businesses, 81 of which are newly formed relationships. Through this network of partners, BSU staff have been contacted about presenting at Rotary clubs in the area, increasing the potential of new partnerships, and encouraging more businesses to actively seek and hire individuals with disabilities.

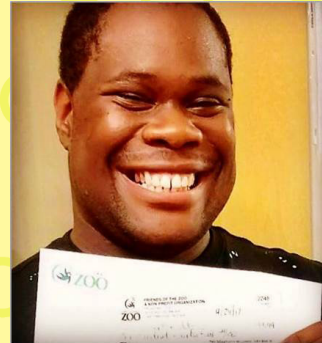
One of the key services that VR's Business Services Unit (BSU) performs is educating businesses on the benefits of employing individuals with disabilities. They regularly partner with employers and partners in local communities to host networking and information-sharing events. One such example is the recent workshop, "How to Hire and Work with Individuals That Have a Disability" that the BSU hosted, in partnership with the Jackson County Mayor and the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce. State partners, including the American Job Center and TN Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DLWD), were in attendance, along with local partners, such as Volunteer Behavioral Health, Jackson County School System, and the Upper Cumberland Workforce Development Board, and local employers, such as Dairy Queen, Mabry Health Care, and Ansi-America. All entities were there to share information and learn about recruiting and retaining employees with disabilities, tax credits available for hiring individuals with disabilities, and additional supports available for the employer and employee once hired. In addition to the education shared, the opportunity allowed area employers and workforce partners to network, address concerns and hiring needs, and allow for partnerships and collaborations to develop between all attending parties.

As COVID-19 has plagued business operations across the state, the partnerships developed by the BSU have played an even larger role in assisting people with disabilities to achieve and maintain their employment goals. Firestone, a company that employs people supported through VR, was in the process of re-opening their plant in Dyersburg after being shut down due to the pandemic. They contacted the Business Employment Consultant (BEC) to see if there was a possibility of changing the employee's work hours to noon to 6:00 p.m. This posed an issue as the employee typically depends on public transportation provided by the Northwest Tennessee Human Resource Agency (NWTTHRA), which operates between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. By contacting NWTTHRA, who is a collaborative partner of the BSU, the BEC was able to make transportation arrangements to accommodate the customer's new work schedule. This successful collaboration demonstrates the commitment of various agencies to serve the needs of our customers to help them maintain successful employment, even during unprecedented times.

SIMPLY SCAN TO
VIEW THE VIDEO.



JOSEPH'S SUCCESS STORY



"I'm going to college, I'm going to get my own business, and I'm getting my own car," says Joseph Fields.

The end of a Chattanooga Publix checkout line is a beginning for Joseph Fields.

"I bag, and I show customers where the stuff is," says Fields. "What do I like about working? Helping others."

The experience and money Joseph makes are part of a bigger plan to someday open his own hair salon and prove those who've doubted him wrong.

"I was diagnosed when I was 12 years old. Folks used to pick on me," recalls Fields.

Joseph is working with support from an employment model called Individual Placement and Support (IPS). It is specifically designed for people with mental illness and/or intellectual disabilities.

"When Joseph first came to us his mental health treatment was inconsistent," says Breona Washington, East TN Business Services Manager. "But then when we were able to get him to see that all of this is going to help you be successful, we saw more consistency."

IPS is a partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services – Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and community providers like AIM Center.

"With IPS, the training takes place on the job. Everything from clocking in being on time for work, how to groom and dress yourself for work," says Washington. "He has come a long way. Joseph's biggest motivation has been being independent, living on his own, and he's doing that now."

Independence and big goals for a supermarket packer whose future is in the bag.

"Having my own job is a big responsibility. If I can do it anybody else can do it," says Fields.

EMPLOYER Q&A

EDNA PROPHATER
Customer Service Manager
Publix Store #1460
Chattanooga, Tennessee

WHAT BENEFITS AND WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED IN EMPLOYING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES?

"Honestly, people with disabilities are very dependable and want to do a good job. They are dedicated to doing a great job when they are here. The challenges we face are communication with the member and sometimes having to repeat instructions. Sometimes the person is nervous to talk to us about an issue that arises."

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER EMPLOYERS ABOUT INTEGRATING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES INTO THE WORKPLACE?

"Appreciate the effort that they give and have an understanding of their limitations. Employers have to understand they will need to be accommodating to each individual. They genuinely want to do a good job but sometimes can't do everything because of various limitations, and you need to be accommodating."

"It's so rewarding because they show that their disability does not limit them. Other employees who don't have disabilities are able to realize that too. It's been a pleasure to work with all of the various members from the AIM Center over the past two and a half years"

DOES THE NATURE OF YOUR WORKPLACE CREATE ANY UNIQUE CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES?

"The challenges are the communicating with customers. They are often very task-focused and aren't used to the customer service side of things which can cause frustration for both the employee and the customer. But the situation creates an opportunity for the employee to work on those skills of communicating with others. It helps them open up and learn how to better communicate with others."

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE SOMEONE WITH A DISABILITY WHO WANTS TO WORK AT PUBLIX?

"Be patient, be open to change and be willing to learn."



OUTCOME: #BUSINESS

PROJECT SEARCH

Project SEARCH, a highly successful one-year internship program aimed at students with disabilities in their last year of high school or young adults working with disability providers, is still expanding across the state. Project SEARCH helps interns receive hands-on training, learn work skills, and have real-world opportunities to strengthen their independent living skills. There are currently 17 Project SEARCH sites across the state. Two more are in the planning process.

One of those in the planning stages would be the very first Project SEARCH site within Tennessee State Government. TennCare Long Term Services and Supports has begun collaborating with Vocational Rehabilitation, the School for the Blind, Metro Nashville Public Schools, community rehabilitation providers, and the founder of Project SEARCH to become a host site. Additionally, TennCare collaborated with other agencies (Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, as well as MCO partner, Amerigroup) on their experiences with implementing Project SEARCH sites to ensure best practices are incorporated into the proposal and plans for program implementation set for fall 2021.

As a way to further promote Project SEARCH efforts, individuals enrolled in Employment and Community First CHOICES may use Integrated Employment Path Services to support coaching and skill development during work-based components of internship programs, including Project SEARCH. The provider must ensure that skills being taught as part of the approved internship program are transferable to more than one type of job after the internship, and not job/task-specific, opening a number of pathways for interns once the program is completed.



GOAL**FOUR** *Rundown*

Make sure Tennessee government hires people with disabilities.

OUTCOME: #GOVERNMENT

- **State Government Internships** – Agencies like the Department of Education, the Council on Developmental Disabilities, and the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities hire young people with disabilities in internships, meaning to work on their team for a short time to help with certain projects. Other agencies like TennCare will offer internships soon, too.
- **Career Explorers Pilot Program** – is internship positions in state government for students from Vanderbilt University's Next Steps Program and Lipscomb University's IDEAL program. In 2020, four students rotated between positions in the Governor's Office, Department of Economic and Community Development, Department of Education, and the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

GOAL **FOUR**

Make Tennessee a model public sector employer through actions to employ more people with disabilities through policy and regulatory change.

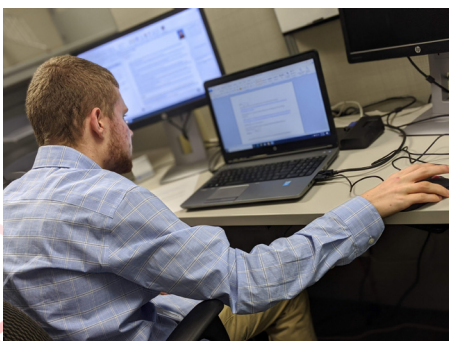
OUTCOME: #GOVERNMENT

Internships have proven to be a valuable step for any student to develop the skills, networking opportunities, and workplace experience they need to kickstart their careers. Interns also provide employers an increase in productivity and an opportunity to improve the overall work environment of their organizations.

Tennessee strives to be a model employer and that includes offering competitive, integrated internship opportunities for students from universities and postsecondary programs around the state and in a variety of career fields. These opportunities continue to expand across agencies with new, innovative approaches to not only offer students an atmosphere for growth but to also support them to identify their strengths and interests to guide their futures. Agencies like the Department of Education, the Council on Developmental Disabilities, and the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities continue to host interns to develop job skills and assist in the day-to-day operations of state government.

One new approach called the Career Explorers Pilot Program kicked off January 14th, 2020, in partnership with Vanderbilt University's Next Steps Program and Lipscomb University's IDEAL program. The Spring 2020 Internship program was spearheaded by the Department of Human Resources and Governor Lee's office and would serve as a pilot for students to experience various opportunities at different agencies within State Government. Four students rotated between positions in the Governor's Office, Department of Economic and Community Development, Department of Education, and the Department of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. These 3-week rotations allowed a broad picture of opportunities available at the state level. From marketing campaigns to organizational projects, the Career Explorers were impactful in the short time that they served with the State of Tennessee. Unfortunately, the pilot was cut short because of complications from COVID-19, but there are plans to resume the pilot in a future semester.

And internships continue to grow. TennCare is also in the process of developing an internship program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, connecting with the Next Steps Program at Vanderbilt University. While the goal was to implement the program in Fall 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic may push this out to the Spring 2021 semester.



SAUL BUDDA DIDD FALL 2019 INTERN



Saul Budda joined DIDD as a Fall 2019 intern with a passion for photography and excited to learn more about what the world of communications and external affairs has to offer. Throughout the semester, Saul utilized his skills with a camera to capture DIDD events, like their annual Enabling Tech Summit. Back at the office, Saul was responsible for collecting news clips about recent happenings for people with disabilities in Tennessee and Nationwide. He also pieced together DIDD's weekly Open Line newsletter and supported other written communication efforts.

"It was great having Saul's assistance in taking photos at some of DIDD's biggest events last fall. His passion for photography is evident and we are so excited to see where those skills take him on his career path," said Krystyne Brown, DIDD Deputy Director of Communications and External Affairs and Saul's supervisor.

Saul graduated from Lipscomb University's IDEAL program in May 2020. Lipscomb IDEAL is a two-year postsecondary program for students with disabilities at the University. In his first year on campus, he interned with the Lipscomb Communications team, taking photos at sporting events and around the university. Then, during the Spring 2020 semester, he continued that work as an intern with GS&F, a marketing agency in Nashville. Saul says one day he wants to own his own photography business and maybe, one day, join the AirForce.

"After I graduate, I want to go back to Lipscomb and get a degree in business. I want to continue taking photos and work for a PR and communications team," Saul said.

HASSUN SYED DIDD SPRING 2020 INTERN



Hassun always brought a smile, a kind greeting for everyone he worked with, and an eagerness to learn during his Spring 2020 internship at the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DIDD). Even though his semester was cut short because of the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders in March 2020, he worked hard to learn about data entry and support DIDD's Protection from Harm teams on Reportable Event Management input during his time at the office.

"The work our Protection from Harm team does is critical to the health and safety of Tennesseans with disabilities and data entry is an important part of that work. Hassun's work was appreciated and helped support their efforts," Krystyne Brown, Deputy Director of Communications and External Affairs and Hassun's supervisor, said. "He also helped our communications team populate online content for employees and kept our team up to date on the latest news. We enjoyed having Hassun as an intern and we look forward to seeing what he does next."

"I like working here. I work hard and I hope to have a job working on a computer," he said.

Hassun is a 2020 Graduate of Lipscomb University's post-secondary IDEAL program. He also interned at Lipscomb University and the TN Department of Education. Now that he's out of college, he is focused on starting his career and says his goals are to work either in IT or data entry in Middle Tennessee.

GOAL **FIVE** *Rundown*

Help students as they leave high school and become working adults.

OUTCOME: #WIN LIFE

- **Online Help for Students and Teachers: TransitionTN.org** – the Department of Education and TennesseeWorks teams created a website with interactive lessons to help students and their teachers prepare for leaving high school.
- **Work-Based Learning** – Schools and vocational rehabilitation work together to help students learn about working. Students can work with their IEP teams to get work-based learning while they are in high school.
- **Alternate Academic Diploma** – a new diploma was created in 2018 for students with the most significant disabilities. It is different from the Special Education diploma because students will learn new courses about disability and will be counted in their school graduation rates.
- **Inclusive Higher Education Programs** – students with intellectual disabilities in Tennessee can go to college programs at Vanderbilt University, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, University of Tennessee at Memphis, Union College, and Lipscomb and East Tennessee State University.
- **Research Projects** – Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) researcher, Erik Carter, Ph.D. has two new research projects that will help professionals understand how to help students get jobs.



GOAL **FIVE**

Prepare students in Tennessee schools for employment throughout their education and connect them to essential services.

OUTCOME: #WIN LIFE

TRANSITION TN

Transition TN has proven to be a resounding success, both as a resource for students and parents, but also as a partnership platform for educators, providers, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and other stakeholders in the disability community. There are currently more than 6,900 registered Transition TN users, and that number continues to grow. The Transition TN team now provides technical assistance to fifteen school districts and has held three communities of practice in school districts across the state.

In addition to expanding the provider portal, Transition TN launched its student portal this summer. The hub will feature interactive lessons to help students learn more about what it will look like as they transition into adulthood.

The Transition TN Leadership Team that was established in May 2018 has met 4 times during the 2019-2020 school year. Made up of educational directors, teachers, state agency representatives, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders, they continue their statewide effort of identifying needs, rallying resources, coordinating efforts, and spotting areas of improvement. Not only has this team helped guide the Transition Bill of Rights, but it helps in the oversight and planning of the Passport to the Future Conference. That conference kicked off its second year as a pre-conference at the Department of Education's annual special education conference and had approximately 447 attendees. Passport to the Future focuses on transitioning students. It equips educators, pre-employment transition service providers, and others with the skills and knowledge to provide exceptional transitional services and supports for students with disabilities.

In response to COVID-19, Transition TN continues to amplify their message of employment through virtual events. These events include forums on how to support educators and providers in their distance teaching and a series of virtual transition fairs for families and students.



AMANDA JONES' STORY PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

Amanda Jones has been totally blind from birth. She also has a hearing loss and has used bilateral hearing aids since she was twelve years old. During her last year of high school, she was referred to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). She came to VR with a vast skillset, including Braille, Kurzweil Reader, JAWS, use of a white cane, and proper use of a guide dog.

Following secondary training, Amanda was enrolled in Post-Secondary training at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. In addition to taking classes in her major at the university, Amanda actively sought out additional opportunities to increase her experience, including enrolling in a Job Club, completing 400 hours of Vocational Adjustment Training at Goodwill Industries of Chattanooga, and completing JAWS training and a computer assessment from Signal Centers.

In March 2019, Amanda was assigned to her current VR counselor, Cheryl Zuckerman. Together, they discussed completing her degree while looking at a variety of options for employment. Amanda was flexible and willing to explore all her employment options. Because of Amanda's extensive knowledge of assistive technology for individuals who are blind, she qualified to volunteer at Signal Centers. This volunteer opportunity allowed her to gain experience and continue developing her resume. Although her official volunteer title was "receptionist," she was able to work with customers to teach them about assistive technology.

Amanda was informed that Signal Centers needed a new JAWS instructor. Immediately, she began refreshing her skills in JAWS to be able to take the test. Fortunately, the training and test were online, which allowed her to complete her certification remotely. She obtained her JAWS Instructor Certification right as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Once her certification was received, she was able to submit it along with her application for employment as a JAWS Instructor to Signal Center via email. Her VR counselor, Ms. Zuckerman, utilized technology through means of text messaging and email to follow up on Amanda's application. By using text messaging, Amanda and Ms. Zuckerman were able to receive updates as the application went through the approval process.

On April 8, 2020, Amanda started her first paid job teaching JAWS to other individuals who are blind or low vision. Due to the circumstances presented by COVID-19, Amanda had to work remotely. In order to provide services remotely, she had to be creative. Amanda provided individual instruction to customers on the use of JAWS software and taught iPhone features and app training via telephone. Less than one week after beginning her job and working from home, her home was impacted by a tornado. She was informed that power would be out for several days. Determined to not let this affect her new job and responsibilities, she relocated to another family member's house to perform her remote work and continue to serve her customers.

By being resourceful, Amanda was able to continue teaching her classes without interruption. Her innovative ideas and ability to find creative ways to continue serving her customers during this difficult time were rewarded with a bonus in her paycheck. Her employer stated, "Amanda has been an excellent addition to our team. She listens to the needs of our customers, helps them set goals, and teaches them the skills they need to become successful."



OUTCOME: #WIN LIFE CONTINUED

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Work-based learning allows students with disabilities to learn employable skills and participate in various work environments. It continues to be a key component in preparing students with disabilities to transition into competitive integrated employment. Transitions in work-based learning have increased by over 4% and enrollment in other work-based learning related courses has increased by over 5%.

Although COVID-19 has halted in-person employment and training, many districts have partnered with employers to hold mock interviews, virtual HR training, and virtual job shadowing.

Additionally, Transition School to Work (TSW) applications were submitted through the end of May 2020, with even more applications being submitted this year than the number of total contracts executed during the 2019-2020 academic school year. The applications for the 2020-2021 academic school year have placed special emphasis on those counties that have been designated as distressed.

These programs continue to successfully provide students with disabilities with the skills and on-the-job experience needed for them to successfully make the transition into a job after leaving the school system.

ALTERNATE ACADEMIC DIPLOMA

The alternate academic diploma (AAD) that was approved in early 2018 is expected to play an integral part in increasing the employment rate for Tennesseans with disabilities. The diploma is designed for students who have a significant cognitive disability, are learning content linked to state content standards, and require extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade-and-age appropriate curriculum. School districts continue to receive support in the implementation of the AAD course requirements and instruction. Additionally, the Department of Education has provided technical assistance and training on the three transition courses for postsecondary readiness: Introduction to Self-Determination, Focus on Adulthood, Planning for Postsecondary.

INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In 2010 the LBD Foundation, the Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Vanderbilt University, and the Tennessee Task Force on Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities worked together to support the creation of Tennessee's first inclusive higher education program.

In January 2010, Next Steps at Vanderbilt and Vanderbilt University welcomed the first class of six students to begin their studies. Next Steps now supports 34 students with intellectual disabilities to complete their four-year college certificate program. The program has seen a more than 90 percent employment rate.

Tennessee now has six inclusive higher education programs at universities across the state. The programs mirror life and expectations of university students with coursework, career exploration, and development experiences, and extra-curricular activities. The programs provide a vast array of opportunities for university faculty, staff, and students to learn about supporting and including people with disabilities. Graduate and undergraduate students gain experience with lesson planning, employment supports, social skills training, and the building of inclusive communities. This year marks the 10th year of inclusive higher education in Tennessee.



JAMIE PERRY'S SUCCESS STORY STAYING CONNECTED DURING A PANDEMIC

While COVID-19 has presented obstacles for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) staff to connect with the customers that they serve and the partners they work with, staff are using all means and platforms necessary to stay connected. Take VR Counselor, Jamie Perry, for example. Jamie is an intricate part of the Tiger Life Program at the University of Memphis. Many of the Tiger Life meetings are done in large numbers, face-to-face with formal presentations and Q&A sessions. With the implementation of safety protocols due to COVID-19, the interactive face of Tiger Life adjusted to a virtual delivery method. Jamie has participated in two student orientations for the program that were done via ZOOM. Students, parents, Tiger Life staff, as well as Jamie were all active participants. During the orientation, Jamie presented about VR services, her affiliation with the Tiger Life program, and responded to questions through the chat feature during her presentation. She continues to maintain contact with the students and parents via phone and email.

Another example of staying connected was during Shelby County Schools completion ceremony (graduation) for students in Project SEARCH. The completion ceremony, done via ZOOM, showcased each student and their achievements. The students were able to thank those involved in their success and participating VR staff, including Jamie, gave words of encouragement and acknowledgment during the ceremony.

Lastly, Jamie has been able to continue her long-standing relationship with Memphis Area schools by attending several IEP meetings via phone. She has maintained consistent contact with the Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) who deliver services to her customers and discuss available job opportunities that may be of interest to them.

OUTCOME: #WIN LIFE CONTINUED

SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND STUDENTS TRANSITIONING TO THE WORKFORCE

Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) researcher, Erik Carter, Ph.D. has introduced two new research projects that focus on supporting youths with disabilities, as well as their parents, as they transition into adulthood and begin to seek employment and adult services. The research will be conducted through the Rehabilitation Research and Training Centers (RRTCs) and will provide the opportunity for more data driven, evidence-based decisions within the employment world for people with disabilities.

The first project will examine the impact of having paid work experiences during high school on the early post-school outcomes of youth with severe disabilities to better understand the impact of employment on students. It will also allow the opportunity to develop practical, free resources that can help schools around the country put best practice into actual practice.

In this project, high school students with severe disabilities will be randomly assigned to one of two study groups: (1) those whose school transition program will somehow involve them in paid work using a supported employment approach during their final year of school, and (2) those whose school transition program will address career preparation and exploration in the absence of paid employment.

School teams and participants will be supported by RRTC staff through employment-related transition assessments, person-centered planning with family members, individualized job development, on-site support, skills training in the classroom, and other resources.

In addition to ensuring the students and families are supported, Carter and his team are also committed to making sure the intervention is feasible and doable in typical schools. The team has held focus groups and advisory council meetings to gain feedback as they finalize the intervention and create materials.

For more information about this transition training center, visit <https://transition.vcurrtc.org>.

In the second study, the VKU research team will develop, pilot, refine, and evaluate an intervention package that combines both information-sharing and parent mentorship in ways that will encourage more parents to pursue and obtain integrated employment for their son or daughter with IDD.

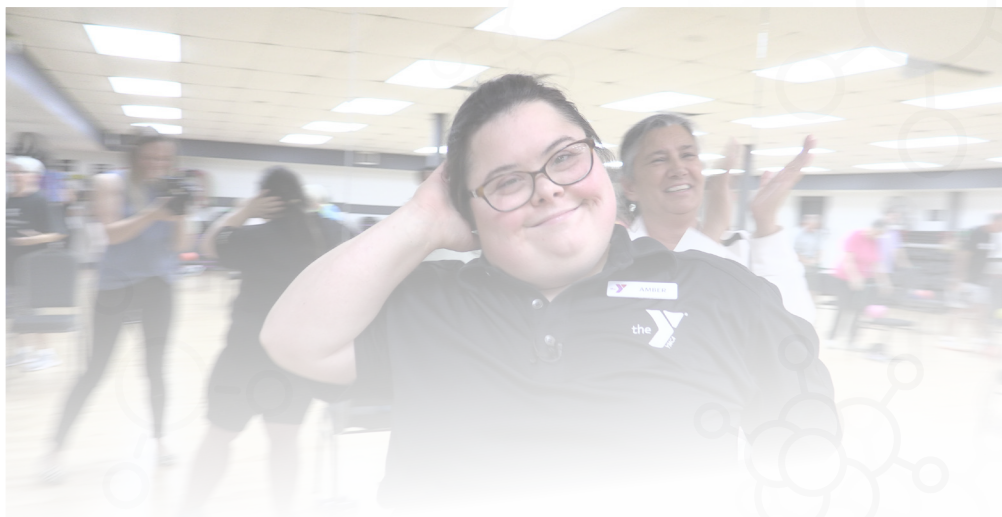
Research began this spring when the team listened to stories and recommendations of more than 50 parents through individual interviews and focus groups. In addition, they met with an advisory council for feedback on how best to design the intervention so that it will make a noticeable difference for families.

The first pilot will be launched next fall that focuses on the expectations, knowledge, and goals families have related to integrated employment. Participating families will receive accessible and relevant information about the benefits of integrated employment and the pathway to work. Families will be matched to one or more mentors who have personal experience supporting a family member with IDD to obtain integrated employment. Mentors will receive training, resources, and ongoing support from the project to equip them to provide encouragement and direction to their parents with whom they partner.

For more information about this employment training center, visit <https://idd.vcurrtc.org>.

DARKO OSMAN'S INTERNSHIP

Darko Osman, a student in his last year of Vanderbilt's Next Steps inclusive higher education program, joined the Council on Developmental Disabilities as a communications intern in February 2020. He completed office tasks and collected key input from council members for communications projects. He also joined the council staff for Disability Day on the Hill. Darko has completed his Next Steps education and is now working on his next goal of permanent employment.

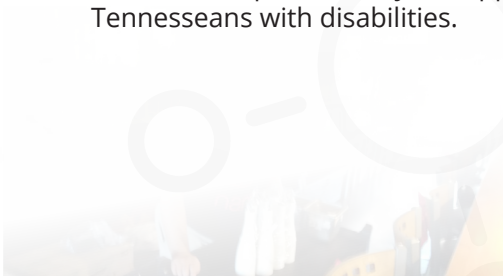


THE **FUTURE** *of* **EMPLOYMENT FIRST** **THE CHALLENGES AHEAD**

As mentioned several times in this report, the COVID-19 public health emergency has created tremendous challenges in advancing the work done to increase employment for people with disabilities. Much of the work conducted previously was hands-on instruction, and that work ceased when schools closed, state agencies went to remote options, internships ended, and many of the people who were gainfully employed were sent home on furlough or laid off entirely. In addition, some of the planned resources that were originally budgeted to expand services had to be eliminated to fill budget shortfalls due to a sharp drop in state revenues.

As of this writing, COVID-19 is still very much present in the state of Tennessee, and the employment landscape will no doubt be permanently changed. With that, services and supports designed to assist persons in learning skills, identifying strengths and weaknesses, developing jobs, and transitioning from school to work must adapt. State agencies and others worked very quickly to transition work into digital environments, and this could have longstanding positive impacts. Use of Enabling Technology among people with disabilities has increased substantially, and that could translate into greater use on the job and less dependence on a job coach in the future. In addition, the workshop model of training has been declining for years, but due to stay-at-home orders and social distancing, it accelerated VR ending contract work in the Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers. All agencies are reporting that they have developed stronger relationships with their customers and have adapted to providing their services virtually.

It the hope of the task force that the urgency with which changes were made to continue the work in the state of emergency will not end. There is even more work to be done now than just six months ago, and the task force hopes not only to support an economic rebound but a boost in employment opportunities for all Tennesseans with disabilities.



APPENDICES

A › EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 28

B › EMPLOYMENT FIRST STRATEGIC PLAN

C › EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE MEMBERS

D › TASK FORCE WORKGROUP PARTICIPANTS

STATE OF TENNESSEE
EXECUTIVE ORDER
BY THE GOVERNOR
No. 28

AN ORDER ESTABLISHING THE TENNESSEE EMPLOYMENT FIRST INITIATIVE TO EXPAND
COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TENNESSEANS WITH DISABILITIES

WHEREAS, Tennesseans with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders and other disabilities, disproportionately experience high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and dependence upon publicly funded programs; and

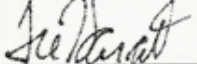
WHEREAS, my Administration is committed to supporting the Employment First Initiative establishing competitive and integrated employment, where work is performed in a typical work setting for a competitive wage.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Bill Haslam, Governor of the State of Tennessee, by virtue of the power and authority vested in me by the Tennessee Constitution and the laws of Tennessee, do hereby order and direct the following:

1. State agencies coordinate efforts to increase opportunities for integrated and competitive employment for Tennesseans with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illnesses, substance abuse disorders and other disabilities.
2. The Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities convene an Employment First Taskforce ("Taskforce").
3. The Taskforce shall consist of representatives from the agencies administering disability services, family members of persons receiving employment services, vocational rehabilitation, workforce services and education, as well as consumer advocates and third party disability service providers.
4. This Taskforce shall:
 - a. Identify state agency policies and procedures that create barriers and disincentives for employment of people with disabilities and develop recommendations to reduce or eliminate those barriers and disincentives to better meet the needs of individuals who desire employment;
 - b. Identify best practices, effective partnerships, sources of available federal funds and opportunities for shared services among existing state agencies to increase integrated and competitive employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities;
 - c. Review and consider the recommendations of the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) to increase opportunities for integrated and competitive employment for Tennesseans with disabilities.
 - d. Develop training on disability employment for state agencies, provider agencies, individuals being supported and their families in order to raise awareness of effective strategies for achieving integrated and competitive employment outcomes.
5. The Taskforce shall convene for its initial meeting on or before August 1, 2013. Thereafter, the Taskforce shall meet quarterly and provide an annual progress report to the Governor.

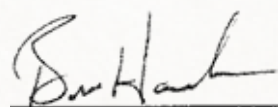
IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have subscribed my signature and caused the Great Seal of the State of Tennessee to be affixed this **19th** day of **June, 2013**.

ATTEST:



SECRETARY OF STATE





GOVERNOR

EMPLOYMENT FIRST STRATEGIC PLAN

MISSION

Create and expand employment opportunities for all Tennesseans with disabilities

VISION

People with disabilities have equal access to employment opportunities

EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 28

An order establishing the Tennessee Employment First initiative to expand community employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities

GOALS

1. Align service delivery systems and strengthen coordination to increase employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities (#Data #Coordination #WIOA #Policy #Legislation #Workforce)
2. Build shared community commitment to Employment First (#Self-Advocates #Families #Community #Communication)
3. Increase the number of employers that hire people with disabilities (#Businesses)
4. Make Tennessee state government a model employer of people with disabilities (#Government #Leadership)
5. Prepare students for employment and post-secondary success (#Education #Transition)

GOAL 1

Align service delivery systems and strengthen coordination to increase employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities (#Data #Coordination #WIOA #Policy #Legislation #Workforce)

OBJECTIVE

Collect, analyze, and integrate employment data of people with disabilities

STRATEGIES

- Maintain employment data dashboard on TennesseeWorks website with regularly updated data from public and private sources, which may include but is not limited to: DIDD, DHS/VR, DOL, TennCare, DOE, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, DMHSAS, TEAM (Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model) TN, Health, Children's Services, TennCare, Treasury, Project SEARCH, etc.
- Explore the possibility of integrating additional data sources into the Tennessee Longitudinal Data System (TLDS), including ways to maximize use of TLDS data
- Evaluate progress annually on statewide employment goal
- Utilize data (e.g. from DOE student data) to make decisions and plan for services in other agencies
- Analyze available data (e.g. Easy IEP, Indicator 13, and Indicator 14) to answer important key questions related to the quality of transition assessment, planning, and services.

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Data workgroup
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center
- Respective state agencies
- Employment Roundtable

OBJECTIVE

Assess impact of interagency MOUs that promote employment for people with disabilities

STRATEGIES

- Continue assessing impact of MOUs regularly at Employment Roundtable meetings. MOUs to be assessed include, but are not limited to:
 - Youth Transition
 - VR/TennCare (ECF CHOICES)
 - VR/DMHSAS (IPS)
 - VR/DIDD (Supported Employment)
 - VR/DOLWD (employment data sharing)
 - VR/TDOC (Day Reporting Community Resource Centers)
 - VR/DOE (pre-employment transition services)
- Clearly delineate state and local agency roles and responsibilities in planning, services, and coordination, and clearly communicate to help individuals and families better understand state and local systems
- Explore the development of a universal form/plan built around the individual
- Utilize customer survey data to assess the efficacy and alignment of local service delivery systems, including with Customer Focused Government (CFG) state goals

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Employment Roundtable
- Respective state agencies

OBJECTIVE

Track implementation and impact of WIOA Combined State Plan sections focused on people with disabilities

STRATEGIES

- Revisit WIOA combined state plan (e.g. presentation by DOL at the Employment Roundtable) to ensure agencies are aware of progress, challenges, and agency roles/responsibilities
- Strengthen partnership and collaboration between DOL and entities that have a disability focus

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- VR
- DOL
- Employment Roundtable

OBJECTIVE

Propose policies, regulations, legislation, and funding that increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities

STRATEGIES

- Monitor implementation of Supported Decision Making legislation
- Continue educating stakeholders (e.g. self-advocates, families, educators, medical practitioners, judges, etc.) about supported decision making options for people with disabilities, including recently passed legislation
- Propose legislation and/or seek state/federal funding to support a career ladder strategy for staff who work for provider agencies
- Pursue additional funding for Individual Placement and Support (IPS)
- Continue exploring strategies to increase the penetration rate of IPS statewide
- Continue pilot and explore additional strategies to effectively support individuals with dual diagnosis (IDD + behavioral health diagnosis) in the workplace
- Continue monitoring the use of sub-minimum wages, under 14(c) certificates, for people with disabilities

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Policy workgroup
- Mental Health Workgroup
- Advocacy organizations
- State agencies (as appropriate per funding/lobbying requirements)
- Employment Roundtable

GOAL 1 ... CONTINUED

Align service delivery systems and strengthen coordination to increase employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities (#Data #Coordination #WIOA #Policy #Legislation #Workforce)

OBJECTIVE

Assess the impact of the Employment and Community First CHOICES program

STRATEGIES

- Continue reporting on ECF CHOICES outcomes, including additional data fields (e.g. wages, industries, demographics of employed individuals, etc.)
- Continue implementing communication strategies to ensure ECF CHOICES information is available and consistent for all stakeholder groups.

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- TennCare
- Individuals/Family Workgroup
- Communications Workgroup
- Advocacy organizations
- Employment Roundtable

OBJECTIVE

Explore workforce strategies to promote recruitment, retention, and development of disability service professionals

STRATEGIES

- Review promising practices nationally
- Share information about new initiatives in Tennessee to provide training at community colleges

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- TennCare, VR, DIDD, and other state agencies as appropriate
- Provider workgroup

GOAL 2

Build shared community commitment to Employment First (#Self-Advocates #Families #Community #Communication)

OBJECTIVE

Cultivate Employment First champions across Tennessee, including individuals and families, community leaders, public officials, schools, private citizens, and other organizations

STRATEGIES

- Host self-sustaining Think Employment Summit (s) including regional summits
- Host Community Conversations across Tennessee and share results
- Complete and share findings from employer expectation survey
- Continue implementing awareness campaigns about the benefits of employing people with disabilities (e.g. social media videos, #HireMyStrengths, etc.)
- Implement strategies to recognize businesses that employ people with disabilities
- Maintain updated content for the resource web page on the TennesseeWorks website
- Convene the Employment First Communications Workgroup quarterly to coordinate strategies for materials and information to support individuals and families in securing employment.
- Consider using "education ministries" model through faith communities
- Ensure parents/caregivers have access to information regarding respite and other related services
- Continue outreach and education about importance of benefits counseling and available resources

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Individuals/Families Workgroup
- Employer Workgroup
- Provider Workgroup
- Communications workgroup
- DOE
- DIDD
- VR
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

OBJECTIVE

Improve and expand communication channels to individuals with disabilities and their families

STRATEGIES

- Continuously seek input from families and stay current in our understanding about what they want and need
- Engage community and grassroots organizations regularly to learn from them and support their work
- Effectively distribute materials/information to support individuals and families in securing employment
- Ensure resources appear in format(s) that are accessible to individuals and families
- Coordinate linkage and messaging across state agency websites
- Continue biweekly blog on TennesseeWorks about issues important to families around employment, independent living, policy, etc.
- Raise awareness among individuals and families about ABLE TN, ECF CHOICES, and VR services
- Use existing forums (e.g. Arc Family Forums, Family Coalition meetings, etc.) to discuss employment topics with families
- Use existing forums (e.g. DIDD regional focus groups, TennCare advisory groups, etc.) to discuss employment topics with individuals with disabilities
- Implement communication strategies to ensure stakeholders are aware of AJC services
- Consider adding specific portals/sections for people with disabilities on sites like Jobs4tn.gov

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Communications workgroup
- Individuals/Families Workgroup
- Provider Workgroup
- DOE
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center
- DOL/AJCs
- VR

GOAL 3

Increase the number of employers that hire people with disabilities (#Businesses)

OBJECTIVE

Cultivate Employment First champions among business leaders across Tennessee

STRATEGIES

- Recognize businesses and individual business leaders who hire people with disabilities (e.g. Governor's Award, highlighting businesses on social media monthly, etc.)
- Seek opportunities to present the "business case" for employing people with disabilities (available on the TennesseeWorks website)
- Share the Employer Outreach Initiative (EOI) materials in the TennesseeWorks website employer section
- Explore training programs that help businesses assess needs, tasks, and opportunities within their company
- Use available data from ECF CHOICES, VR, DMHSAS, DIDD, etc. to identify businesses that hire people with disabilities and approach them about becoming part of the broader Employment First movement. Tap into the experiences and expertise of these businesses to continue refining our business engagement practices.

GOAL 3 ... CONTINUED

Increase the number of employers that hire people with disabilities (#Businesses)

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Employer Workgroup
- Provider workgroup
- Policy Workgroup
- VR, DOL, and other state agencies as appropriate

OBJECTIVE

Establish baseline and set goals for the number of Tennessee businesses that employ people with disabilities

STRATEGIES

- Develop a system to collect and analyze data about businesses that employ people with disabilities in Tennessee
- Establish relationships with Workforce 360 (ECD) and American Job Centers (AJCs) at the local level
- Increase awareness and use of AJC system

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Data workgroup
- Employer workgroup
- DOL/AJCs

OBJECTIVE

Create and expand partnerships with existing workforce initiatives

STRATEGIES

- Consider implementing strategies to establish local/regional “single points of contact” for employers
- Consider adding Disability:IN (formerly Business Leadership Network) group in Tennessee

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Employer workgroup
- DOL, VR, and other state agencies as appropriate

OBJECTIVE

Create additional partnerships between employers and school transition programs

STRATEGIES

- Establish additional employer partnerships, (e.g. Project SEARCH, Walgreen’s REDI, Sam’s Club/Waves training program, etc.)
- Use DOE modules content to meet professional development needs of transition stakeholders

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- DOE
- Employer workgroup
- Provider workgroup
- VR

GOAL 4

Make Tennessee state government a model employer of people with disabilities (#Government #Leadership)

OBJECTIVE

Develop initiatives that increase internship and employment opportunities for people with disabilities within Tennessee state government ("Phase 1")

STRATEGIES

- Engage the TN Department of Human Resources as a partner in making TN a model public sector employer
- Work with the Commissioner of TN Department of HR on the possibility of expanding paid and unpaid internships and employment opportunities within state government
- Develop a toolkit for starting internships
- Continue conversations with TN state parks systems about hiring people with disabilities
- Tennessee Leadership Academy for Excellence in Disability Services (LAEDS)
- Explore how lessons/practices learned at the state government level may be applicable to local/county governments.
- Gather a baseline of how many state employees self-disclose having a disability
- Define disability and other key terms for purposes of using a "common language"
- Create strategic plan that includes evaluation of current practices
- Partner with VR to develop pipeline of candidates interested in public service

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Policy Workgroup
- DD Council

OBJECTIVE

Create toolkit that serves as a resource for TN communities to work towards becoming a model public sector employer of people with disabilities ("Phase 2")

STRATEGIES

- Identify and support communities (city/county governments) that want to become model employer communities
- Define characteristics of successful model public sector employers
- Explore the possibility of using/adapting the public toolkit for private businesses
- Exchange best practices with employer engagement group (i.e. which best practices are relevant for public and private engagement)

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- Policy Workgroup
- DD Council

GOAL 5

Prepare students for employment and post-secondary success (#Education #Transition)

OBJECTIVE

Expand use of Transition TN among educators and other stakeholders

STRATEGIES

- Highlight various TransitionTN resources and lessons through Transition Tennessee listserv
- Encourage school districts in need of assistance to access TransitionTN as the first step in taking a proactive approach to improving student outcomes
- Develop regional communities of practice (CoP) and leverage the resources in TransitionTN as a means to support the CoPs
- Ensure students and families have access to information that lists and explain all options/programs available upon exiting the school system.
- Consider adding video/module about benefits and how they are impacted by working
- Identify and showcase local success stories in counties around the state
- Use Community Conversations model to invest and learn from families

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- DOE
- VR
- Communications workgroup

OBJECTIVE

Educate stakeholders on diploma options and assess impact

STRATEGIES

- Start a study of the new diploma options (e.g. occupational and alternate academic diploma), their implementation, and their impact on student outcomes

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- DOE
- Communications workgroup

OBJECTIVE

Provide technical assistance and coaching for transition professional development modules

STRATEGIES

- Implement and evaluate a plan for professional development that includes both live training and online resources through Transition Tennessee.
- Develop a “talking points” series that focuses on superintendents, school administrators, and other professionals that importance of investing in transition and employment, including Career Technical Education (CTE)
- Showcase schools and programs in the state that are effectively connecting students to early work experiences.
- Establish baselines and measure outcomes for transitional professional development modules
- Develop a set of district and school level reflection tools addressing best and recommended practices in transition and employment

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- DOE
- Communications workgroup

OBJECTIVE

Increase work-based learning opportunities for transitioning students

STRATEGIES

- Focus on equipping partners around the state to implement workbased learning (e.g. courses/resources available for high school students and educators about WBL and transition)
- Increase paid work opportunities for students while they are still in school
- Continue to recruit WBL Coordinators to serve on the WBL Leadership Council and train additional WBL coordinators across the state
- Develop regional communities of practice (CoP) with a goal of determining how to increase WBL in local school districts
- State agencies representatives to participate on Business Advisory Committees for Project SEARCH, Next Steps, IDEAL, etc.
- Identify and connect school, community, and postsecondary education partnerships aimed at increasing certified TN Pathways opportunities for students with disabilities.

RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

- DOE
- DOL
- VR

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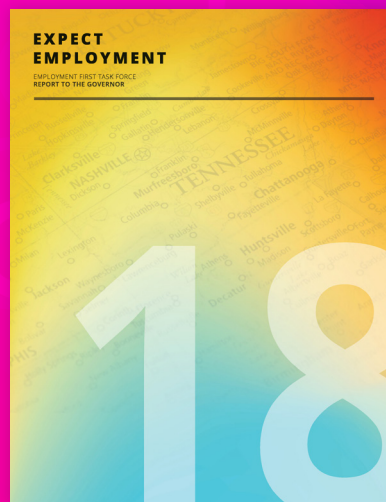
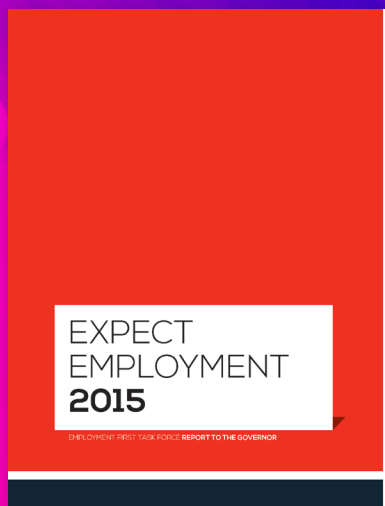
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VIEW OUR **EXPECT EMPLOYMENT REPORTS** FROM
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tn.gov/didd/e1st



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