

# **Governor, Agencies Collaborate to Advance ‘Employment First’ for People with Disabilities**

**by Kathy McAllister**

People with disabilities want to work – and Florida is ramping up efforts to ensure that employment is the first option for individuals with disabilities, including persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Over the past decade, “Employment First” has emerged as a declaration of both philosophy and policy, stating that integrated employment is the first priority and preferred outcome for individuals with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. On October 8, Gov. Rick Scott issued Executive Order 13-284, Reaffirming Commitment to Employment for Floridians with Disabilities. The Executive Order supports Employment First efforts in Florida by stating that “Employment is the most direct and cost-effective means in helping an individual achieve independence and self-fulfillment, which should be the primary objective of public assistance programs wherever possible.”

The definition of employment used by Gov. Scott mirrors that of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, described in the Council’s 2014 Employment First position paper:

Employment is defined as “integrated employment, including supported employment, customized employment, and self-employment, where an individual is paid by an employer at minimum wage or greater or receives earnings through one’s self-employment business, fully integrated in the community workforce, with a goal of maximum self-sufficiency.”

The governor’s Executive Order mandates development of an interagency cooperative agreement between key Florida agencies and organizations, including the Council, and it requires that the agreement formalize objectives aligned with the elements of high-performing states which have an evidence base for improving integrated employment services. The elements address the broad areas of leadership, strategic goals and benchmarks, financing and contracting methods, training opportunities, collaboration, service innovation, and accountability to prioritize employment and sustain efforts.

Required partners include the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD); the Florida Department of Education (FDOE), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), Division of Blind Services, and Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS); the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) and Workforce Florida Inc. boards; the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH) Program; and the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. (FDDC). Other state agencies and disability service organizations – including the Governor’s Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities and The Able Trust – have been meeting collaboratively with these stakeholders to formalize Employment First efforts in Florida. It is anticipated that other state agencies and disability service organizations may also be involved in developing and implementing the interagency cooperative agreement.

Not only does employment lead to maximum self-sufficiency of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but, according to the Social Security Administration (SSA), “SSA disability beneficiaries who are employed through Vocational Rehabilitation support provide a return on investment of \$7 for every dollar spent.” In the long term, prioritizing employment for persons with disabilities will lead to an expanded tax base and an increase in dollars earned being returned to the community.

The National Governors Association's Blueprint for Governors report, "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities," indicates that states with Employment First policies tend to achieve better employment outcomes and encourages states to develop and support Employment First initiatives.

The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council applauds Gov. Scott's commitment to employment for Floridians with disabilities. This commitment has led to an unprecedented spirit of collaboration between state agencies and disability service organizations over the past year, with all partners expressing a strong desire to continue and expand cooperative efforts for improving employment.

We believe the governor's Executive Order will strengthen collaboration with state agencies and other disability service organizations and lead to improved employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Florida. Through Employment First, Floridians with disabilities will become tomorrow's taxpayers, voters, our neighbors and friends.

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