



Employment First  
FLORIDA

***2019-20***  
**ANNUAL REPORT OF  
ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

This report was developed by the Employment First Partners.

## **EMPLOYMENT FIRST PARTNERS**

Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities

Florida Department of Education, Bureau of  
Exceptional Student Education

Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Florida Department of Education, Division of Blind Services

Florida Department of Economic Opportunity

CareerSource Florida

Florida Department of Children and Families,  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Office

Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc.

Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, Inc.

The Arc of Florida, Inc.

Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged

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Annual Report 2019-20  
[www.employmentfirstfl.org](http://www.employmentfirstfl.org)

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Employment First is based on the belief that everyone benefits when individuals with disabilities are included in the workforce. Florida's Employment First Act of 2016 was the culminating achievement of efforts to address barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities and solidified the state's commitment to employment. The Employment First Act became part of section (s.) 413.80, a comprehensive legislative package supporting several initiatives related to individuals with disabilities. The Act provides legislative findings regarding the present challenges confronting persons with disabilities in the labor market and provides the purpose of the Act to "prioritize employment of individuals with disabilities and to change the employment system to better integrate individuals with disabilities into the workforce."

Data from the American Community Survey<sup>1</sup> (ACS) indicate that working-age adults with disabilities nationally and in Florida are employed at a much lower rate than working-age adults without disabilities. Among those with disabilities, individuals with cognitive disabilities have the lowest rate of employment.<sup>2</sup> ACS data also demonstrate that within the U.S. as a whole and in Florida, individuals with disability experience poverty at significantly higher rates than individuals without disability.<sup>3</sup> These data indicate that individuals with a disability are less likely to work and more likely to be poor.

The Employment First Act has helped to establish collaborative solutions to support more Floridians with disabilities to become employed and achieve economic independence by reducing obstacles to employment faced by people

## INTRODUCTION



with disabilities. A 2015 study conducted by The Able Trust found that employer perceptions about the capacity of individuals who have disabilities to perform work and job seeker concerns over losing their benefits once employed have been barriers to employment of individuals who have disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Other research has found that new employment support practices have been developed, including discovery, use of assistive and personal technology, use of personal networks, customized employment, and self-employment, but adoption of these practices is limited (Migliore, Butterworth, Lyons, Nye-Lengerman, & Foos, 2018; Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, & Gelb, 2012).

Through its Employment First initiative, Florida is setting new standards by providing

opportunities for both employers and potential employees. At state and local levels, agencies are making substantial gains in assessing and improving how individuals are included and supported in attaining their employment goals. Florida's Employment First Initiative has made a lasting impact on access to employment by creating systemic change. Over a dozen policies and practices implemented by state agencies and employment organizations have been improved to realign services to support integrated employment, improve employability for all students and adults, and increase access to career and technical/vocational opportunities. This report will highlight the efforts of the state-wide partnership that is creating tangible outcomes in employment so that all individuals with disabilities can enter and compete in the labor market.



<sup>1</sup> The American Community Survey (ACS) is a national survey designed and administered by the U.S. Census Bureau to better understand changing communities. The ACS collects information from all 50 states and D.C. on topics such as disability, age, race, income, and other demographic and personal data ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)).

<sup>2</sup> ACS data show that in 2019 in the nation as a whole, 76% of persons with no disability were employed, while only 38% of individuals with a disability and 30% of individuals with a cognitive disability were employed. In Florida 75% of persons with no disability were employed, while only 36% of individuals with a disability and 27% of individuals with a cognitive disability were employed.

<sup>3</sup> In 2019 in the U.S., 10.7% of individuals without a disability lived in a household with income below poverty, as opposed to 24.4% of individuals with disabilities and 28.4% of individuals with a cognitive disability. In Florida 10.1% of individuals without a disability lived in a household with income below poverty, as opposed to 24% of individuals with disabilities and 25.6% of individuals with a cognitive disability.

<sup>4</sup> Born, P. and Dumm, R. "Key Factors that Assist Employers to Recruit, Interview, Hire and Retain People with Disabilities." Prepared for The Able Trust through Florida State University, June 2011.

# HISTORY OF EMPLOYMENT FIRST FLORIDA

Building upon the foundation of Executive Order 11-161, which created the Governor's Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities, and research conducted through a partnership between the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC), the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disability Services (NASDDDS), the stakeholders comprising Florida's framework of employment supports for individuals with disabilities first coalesced to develop an Employment First initiative in 2012. The effort sought to empower key agencies and organizations throughout Florida to create systemic and grassroots changes, using lessons learned from comparable states, to better equip individuals with disabilities for integrated employment and to support employers with tools for identifying, hiring and retaining these individuals as part of a diverse and vibrant workforce.

Interagency workgroups were organized to implement the Employment First initiative, which included networking between employers and qualified job seekers through an "Abilities Work" Web Portal and Help Desk and creating public awareness of the power of inclusion within the workforce through a Multi-Agency, Long Term Communications Plan. Under the

auspices of a five-year Interagency Cooperative Agreement set forth in 2014, Florida's nine employment partnership agencies have continued their collaboration to implement a framework for improving growth in competitive employment outcomes. The agencies and organizations continued working together to pursue strategic goals and best practices common among states with exemplary standards for integrated employment.<sup>5</sup>

The partnership grew to encompass a broad array of stakeholders serving in specific capacities. The Employment First Partnership Coalition and Employment First Collaborative Team, comprised of agency and organization leaders, drive the coordination and implementation of the Interagency Cooperative Agreement and work collaboratively to identify solutions to employment barriers; and the Employment First Grassroots Group is composed of individuals with disabilities and local level stakeholders whose ongoing input serves as an invaluable source of information on the real impact of the state's activities. In 2019, the five-year Interagency Cooperative Agreement was updated and renewed with two additional organizations joining as collaborative partners (i.e., The Arc of Florida, Inc.; Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged).



<sup>5</sup>Hall, A.C., Butterworth, J., Winsor, J., Gilmore, D.S., & Metzel, D. (2007). *Pushing the employment agenda: Case study research of high performing states in integrated employment. Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.*



**“The conversations in Florida have changed since the state began its Employment First efforts in 2011. The culture shift has been to move away from focusing on individuals receiving services and instead focus on helping people receive the supports they need to be included in the community.”**

**Employment First State Level Partner**



# EMPLOYMENT FIRST PARTNERS' OBJECTIVES

The 2016 Employment First Act requires the state Partners (as well as other appropriate organizations) to identify within an Interagency Cooperative Agreement the roles and responsibilities of the Partners:

Florida Agency  
for Persons  
with Disabilities

The Florida  
Department of  
Education,  
Bureau of  
Exceptional  
Student Education



The Florida  
Department of  
Education,  
Division of  
Vocational  
Rehabilitation

The Florida  
Department of  
Education,  
Division of Blind  
Services



The Florida  
Department  
of Economic  
Opportunity



CareerSource  
Florida, Inc.

The Florida  
Department  
of Children  
and Families,  
Substance Abuse  
and Mental  
Health Office



The Florida  
Developmental  
Disabilities  
Council, Inc.

The Florida  
Association of  
Rehabilitation  
Facilities, Inc.



The Arc of  
Florida, Inc.

Florida  
Commission  
for the  
Transportation  
Disadvantaged



The five-year Interagency Cooperative Agreements (i.e., 2014 and 2019), state that these Partners are “fully committed to working together to improve the number and percentage of growth in competitive employment for individuals with disabilities.” The general purpose of the agreement is to provide a framework for a long-term commitment to improving employment outcomes for Floridians with disabilities. The agreement outlines specific roles and responsibilities along with the following objectives:

**Establishing a commitment by the leadership of the agencies and organizations to maximize resources and coordination to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities who seek publicly funded services;**

**Developing strategic goals and benchmarks to assist the agencies and organizations in implementing the agreement;**

**Identifying financing and contracting methods that will help to prioritize employment for individuals with disabilities;**

**Establishing training methods to better integrate individuals with disabilities into the workforce;**

**Ensuring collaborative efforts between multiple agencies to achieve the purposes of the act;**

**Promoting service innovations to better assist individuals with disabilities in the workplace; and**

**Identifying accountability measures to ensure the sustainability of the agreement.**

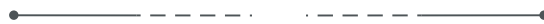
State level stakeholders continued to meet regularly, and the Grassroots Group meets quarterly via webinars. Information and resources are maintained on the Employment First Florida website at [www.employmentfirstfl.org](http://www.employmentfirstfl.org)

# EMPLOYMENT FIRST PARTNERS' COLLABORATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During 2019-20, the Employment First Partners made significant advancements to improve employment outcomes for transition age youth, strengthen connections between employers and job seekers, and learn from stakeholders. The Partners communicated regularly and developed a successful mechanism for collaboration.

The Partners' ongoing collaboration has yielded tremendous results. Not only have

they steadily improved their internal capacities to facilitate better employment practices for individuals with disabilities at every level, they continue to develop and implement mechanisms to improve employment outcomes. The Partners revised, created, improved, and/or implemented a total of 58 employment-related policies, procedures, promising practices and best practices in 2019-20. A few highlights of their collaborative efforts include the following:



## Renewal and Expansion of the Interagency Cooperative Agreement

On October 8, 2013, Governor Rick Scott signed Executive Order 13-284 mandating the creation of an interagency cooperative agreement among specific state agencies and other disabilities service organizations to ensure the continuation of a long-term commitment to improving employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. A formal five-year interagency cooperative agreement was executed on May 7, 2014 with an effective date of July 1, 2014.

CS/HB 7003: Individuals with Disabilities was passed by the Florida Legislature and signed by Governor Rick Scott with an effective date of July 1, 2016. The legislation was codified in Florida Statute as the Employment First Act in section 413.80, Florida Statutes.

The legislative findings and intent state that "employment is the most direct and cost-effective means to assist an individual in achieving independence and fulfillment;

however, individuals with disabilities are confronted by unique barriers to employment which inhibit their opportunities to compete fairly in the labor force. It is the intent of the Legislature to provide a framework for a long-term commitment to improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities in this state through the implementation of this act."

The five-year interagency cooperative agreement was renewed and expanded in 2019. New signatory partners included the Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged and The Arc of Florida, Inc., demonstrating not only the continued commitment of the original members but also the utility other stakeholder groups place on collaborative efforts to improve employment for Floridians with disabilities. The agreement will require formal renewal to remain in effect beyond June 30, 2024.





## Investing in work-based learning for transition age youth

Partnerships between the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and local Florida school districts supported high school students with disabilities to transition to employment after secondary and postsecondary education. One way that students have accessed VR's services before completing school is through a work-based learning experience (WBLE). While participating in a WBLE, students spend their time in a real work environment, taking on workplace responsibilities, acquiring skills, and gaining insight into their own work interests and the requirements of careers. A WBLE also requires that students take an active part in the program, learning new skills and evaluating themselves on their progress. WBLEs are open to students with disabilities ages 14 to 21 who are still in school.

The Home Builders and Contractors Association (HBCA) of Brevard County, and other partners created WBLEs that took place over the summer. Students from Brevard County public high schools participated. Employers from the association offered WBLEs and service provider agencies working with VR helped match the students with the employers. Each student worked with a VR counselor to choose a service provider and interviewed with the employers offering WBLEs through that provider.

Once the students were matched, they participated in the WBLEs over two three-week sessions. Students were given a variety of specialized construction, maintenance, and clerical tasks, often taking on a variety of tasks each day. Some became interested in learning specific skills, such as welding, and in pursuing careers in the construction field, and at least one student plans to enter into an apprenticeship upon graduation. The partners compiled a video showcasing these work opportunities that is available on YouTube.

To increase the students' sense of responsibility for their work, the employers assigned more experienced students greater leadership roles. Although the \$11 per hour was a strong motivator for many students, the increased responsibility also improved students' motivation and work performance.

The WBLEs offered students the opportunity to take on many types of work at an apprentice level. They also introduced employers to new people to add to their talent pipeline. The partners considered the WBLEs successful and plan to offer three times as many opportunities in 2020-21.



## A Focus on Collaborative Training

The Florida Employment First Collaborative Training (EFCT) Toolkit provides a guide for all employment service professionals—from executive directors and managers to front-line direct support staff—to assess their current capacity and training needs and to identify options for addressing them. Directors and managers may refer to the EFCT Toolkit as a resource to plan overall training for agency or organization staff, as well as to identify specific training needs of individual staff. Evaluating training needs on an individual basis allows customization of staff training to meet the specific needs of each staff member—a far more effective strategy for addressing ongoing professional development needs. The guide is a companion to the domain videos found on the Employment First Florida website.

The first four sections of the toolkit correspond to the domains and core competency standards identified by the Association of

People Supporting Employment First (APSE). The EFCT Advisory Committee selected these core competencies as the basis for assessing organizational and individual capacity and training needs because they represent an evidence-based national standard for employment services designed to lead to the development of professional competencies—those determined to be critical to the accomplishment of sustained, high quality employment outcomes. Each section includes: 1) The identification of the APSE Domain; 2) A list of aggregated core competencies for that domain and the recommended minimum training time; 3) An assessment tool to evaluate the current capacity and training needs of an organization or of an individual employment specialist; 4) A list of recommended trainings related to the core competencies identified for that particular domain; and 5) A training resource list for the particular competency.





agency for persons with disabilities  
*State of Florida*

APD supports individuals with developmental disabilities in living, learning, and working in their communities!

**2,410**  
individuals employed!

State Fiscal Year	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
APD Customers Served	53,289	54,764	59,735	61,110	62,384
Number in Competitive Employment	2,367	2,837	2,957	1,922*	2,410
Percent in Competitive Employment	4.4%	5.2%	5%	3.1%	3.86%
Number in Day Services (ADT & SE only)	16,273	16,493	16,088	54,764	15,972
Percent Receiving Day Services (ADT and/or SE only) who are in Competitive Employment	9.5%	10.9%	9.2%	12%	15%
Number Wanting Employment who are not employed (QSI)	7,974	7,366	7,682	7,184	6,075

Sources: a. Annual Reports to ICI State Data; b. Annual APD Long-Range Program Plan; c. APD Monthly Data Reports.

\*The reduction in numbers from previous years is due to data collection changes from implementing a new client data management system for the agency. More accuracy is expected in next year's report.





### Legislative Appropriations for Employment Enhancement Program

APD has received funding over the past eight years to provide employment services to individuals on the APD waiting list. During Fiscal Year (FY) 2019-20, Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature appropriated \$900,000 to APD for the Employment Enhancement Program. This money was used to help students and adults on APD's waiting list find jobs and internships throughout Florida. Services funded include supported employment coaching, follow-along services, paid internships, transportation, personal assistance, and other added supports and services. APD works closely with schools, families, and providers to achieve their goals. The FY 2019-20 appropriation helped 126 individuals on the waiting list obtain competitive employment, 11 to secure internships, and 342 individuals to maintain their jobs.

### Employment is the First Option

APD is committed to increasing opportunities for people with developmental disabilities to succeed in the workforce. APD employees are trained to help individuals explore employment as the first option among an array of day activities. As part of this effort, APD is improving the method of collecting and reporting data, including identifying individuals who want to work in their community.

### Partnership with Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

APD continues to strengthen its partnership with VR. The agencies continue to work together to support career counseling for individuals in sheltered workshops who are earning subminimum wages. This will allow APD and VR to mutually support more individuals who want to work in their community and to help them achieve greater independence.

### Disability Employment Awareness Celebration

Every October, APD takes the lead on hosting a Disability Employment Awareness Celebration at City Hall in downtown Tallahassee. At this annual event employers and employees are recognized and honored for their hard work and dedication to the employment of people with disabilities. The employers honored in 2019 were:

Accuform Manufacturing, Aramark Dining Services at Jacksonville University, Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Bob's Space Racers, Chartwells at the University of Miami, Cleveland Clinic Martin Health, The Home Depot, Florida Department of Revenue, Golden Corral, The Chocolate Spectrum, Wawa, Inc., ZVRS of Clearwater



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF  
**EDUCATION**  
fldoe.org



Florida's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has enjoyed another productive year. In the 2019-2020 state fiscal year (SFY), 5,389 individuals with disabilities found or kept a job through the excellent work done by VR employees and community partners. That means that 5,389 lives were changed for the better in ways we can only begin to imagine.

**49,661**  
customers served!

State Fiscal Year	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
VR Customers Served	42,099	45,887	46,323	48,516	49,661
Number of Customers Gainfully Employed*	5,194	5,975	4,751	5,924	5,389
Rehabilitation Rate	40.38%	39.58%	33.60%	40.54%	37.69%
Percentage of Gainfully Employed Customers with Significant or Most Significant Disabilities	99.56%	94.14%	92.04%	93.25%	93.45%
Average Hourly Wage	\$11.44	\$11.91	\$11.94	\$12.12	\$12.07
Total First Year Projected Earnings	\$89.3M	\$106.9M	\$88.2M	\$113.2M	\$100.9M
VR Return on Investment **	\$8.38	\$8.62	\$6.66	\$8.34	\$7.88

*The Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is an equal opportunity employer. It is against the law for VR as a recipient of Federal financial assistance to discriminate against any individual in the United States on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, political affiliation or belief. The application process used by VR to determine eligibility for services, any subsequent services and the entire VR process are subject to these non-discrimination requirements. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. VR program receives 78.7 percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For the 2021 Federal fiscal year, the total amount of grant funds awarded were \$176,836,896. The remaining 21.3 percent of the costs (\$47,860,557) were funded by Florida State Appropriations. Revised October 2021.*



**Ticket to Work** is a Social Security Administration (SSA) program that encourages disability beneficiaries to make informed choices about returning to work and to earn enough to become self-sufficient. VR has partnered with 61 Community Work Incentive Coordinators to offer benefits planning services. VR is also working closely with 12 employment networks to deliver ongoing support services and ensure beneficiaries experience a smooth transition from VR.

**VR Supported Employment Services** are uniquely designed, providing resources so that everyone can work — even individuals with the most significant and complex disabilities. We are working with our agency partners, including the Agency for Persons with Disabilities and the Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, to make employment the first and preferred option for all individuals.

**Project SEARCH** is a collaborative internship program between a business, school district and VR that allows individuals with disabilities in their last year of high school to develop the skills needed for meaningful careers. This program has impressive results with almost 75% of participants obtaining employment. Currently, there

are 34 host businesses across the state. VR is pleased to announce its support of a new Adult Model of Project SEARCH, which is designed to assist adults in pursuing Competitive Integrated Employment.

**VR Supported Self-Employment Services** provide opportunities and support so VR customers may pursue dreams of owning their own business. VR provides guidance and support from the inception through business implementation. By helping entrepreneurs find success, VR is returning Florida tax dollars to the community. VR's Business Relations Program Team builds and sustains partnerships with businesses to assist them to recruit, hire, promote and retain qualified individuals with disabilities. Outreach is accomplished through networking with businesses and industry stakeholders. Outcomes for the 2019-2020 SFY served 467 employers at 572 locations.

**Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)** expand the array of VR services that students with disabilities may access while in high school and when pursuing postsecondary education. Core services are career exploration counseling, work-readiness training, community-based work experiences, self-advocacy training and

postsecondary educational counseling to prepare students for successful employment. VR introduced the STAR portal, where school districts submit referrals to VR electronically, which allow students to access core services without making a VR application. VR served 26,387 students' ages 14-21 during the 2019-2020 SFY.

**Work Based Learning Experience Contracts** are agreements with local school districts to leverage VR funding to deliver community work experiences to students with disabilities. 32 school districts are participating to provide for students who would not have otherwise received any work experience.

**Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE)** Program provides age-appropriate opportunities for learning, employment preparation, recreational activities, social interactions and the development of natural supports to students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities at institutions of higher education. Many of the 20 programs deliver career and technical training leading to industry-recognized certifications.

**822**

Floridians with visual disabilities  
achieved successful employment  
outcomes in SFY 2019-2020

The Division of Blind Services exceeded its employment goal by supporting 822 individuals with achieving competitive integrated employment. This exceeds our target by 67 successful individuals. Helping clients to achieve their goal of obtaining employment makes a difference to the clients, their families, businesses, local communities, and the state's economy.

State Fiscal Year	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Employment Program Customers	5,227	5,232	4,903	4,854	4,984
Rehabilitation Rate	53%	56%	59%	57.38%	58.57%
Successful Employment Closures	700	713	761	840	855
Transition Services	533	541	491	531	347
Percentage in Competitive Integrated Employment	99%	91.43%	96.49%	100%	99.52%
Average Hourly Rate	\$14.34	\$14.49	\$14.73	\$14.64	\$ 16.85

Source: DBS case management system (AWARE)



## Business Engagement at DBS

Business engagement is interaction between Employers, DBS Employment Specialists, CareerSource Florida, and Education Organizations. Our collaboration results in measurable improvement in desired outcomes for all stakeholders. Engaging business and industry is a critical component to training and placing job seekers with disabilities. Business engagement can range from purely advisory interactions to long-term strategic partnerships. In 2019-20, there were 2019 new employer contacts. A partnership with DBS can meet the following business needs:

- Access to a new talent pool of qualified candidates for employment.
- Access to DBS employment team members with knowledge and expertise regarding the employment needs of people that are blind or visually impaired.
- Blindness awareness training.
- Creation and funding of a range of work-experiences including on-the-job training and internships.
- Opportunities for collaboration with community colleges, community rehabilitation programs, and other organizations responsive to workforce needs of businesses; and
- Tax incentives.

## Creating Entrepreneurs through the Division's Business Enterprise Program

The DBS Business Enterprise Program provides self-employment opportunities in the food service sector for eligible individuals who are blind and visually impaired. The program has 117 licensed blind vendors managing 142 vending facilities in federal, state, county and private facilities. DBS blind vendors generated \$20.3M in taxable gross sales for SFY 2020, with average salary earnings of over \$62,357.

## DBS Maximizes Federal Returns under SSA VR Reimbursement Program

The Division of Blind Services' Vocational Rehabilitation Reimbursement Program helps blind and visually impaired Floridians go to work. Under this program, SSA reimburses DBS for the cost of services the Division provides to its clients if the services result in the client attaining work at a specific earning level.

Established in 1981 by Congress, the program's purpose is to make agencies like DBS more easily accessible to Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities, and to generate savings to both the Social Security Trust and to the state General Revenue Fund. In 2019-20 DBS collected \$2,788,718.99 in claims reimbursements.





**23,582**  
Job seekers with  
Disabilities

State Fiscal Year	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Job Seekers	685,385	673,382	483,159	750,567
Job Seekers with Disabilities	34,056	27,774	23,373	23,582
Percentage with Disabilities	4.97%	4.12%	4.84%	3.14%

Source: Florida Department of Economic Opportunity



## Employment Networks

The CareerSource Florida network includes 24 Local Workforce Development Boards operating nearly 100 career centers across the state. Several local boards serve as Employment Networks with the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program. This program gives local boards the opportunity to provide choices, services, and support that individuals with disabilities need to enter the workforce and maintain employment.

## Unique Abilities Partner Program

Florida's Unique Abilities Partner Program recognizes businesses and organizations committed to providing career and financial opportunities to individuals with disabilities. Participating businesses demonstrate their dedication to strengthening communities and the economy by helping these individuals with untapped talents become more independent. Certified businesses and organizations receive a decal to display that shows they hire and support persons with disabilities. Businesses' names are also displayed on the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO)'s website, [FloridaJobs.org/UniqueAbilities](http://FloridaJobs.org/UniqueAbilities). DEO has more than 180 statewide partners that participate in the Unique Abilities Partner Program.

## Abilities Work Portal

The Abilities Work portal provides a one-stop solution for employers seeking to hire qualified job seekers with disabilities. Additionally, job seekers may use this portal to search for jobs and other resources, including training services and access to additional collaborative partners' websites and services.

## Employment in Action

CareerSource Central Florida (CSCF) partners with Lighthouse Central Florida, a non-profit that promotes the employment, independence, and success of people living with vision loss or blindness.

Recently, an individual with a visual disability was seeking Reemployment Assistance and connected with the CSCF team. He had previously been employed in the car wash industry and had basic computer skills. He was selected to participate in the Lighthouse Central Florida customer service training for individuals with visual disabilities.

After completing the training, he was hired as a Customer Service Representative with Lighthouse Works for DEO's Reemployment Assistance Program. He appreciated the dedicated support and encouragement he received from his CSCF Career Consultant and expressed that it has meant a lot to him that his ability to work was the focus rather than his disability, as he has encountered in the past. Recently, he gained independence and moved into his own apartment, and is looking forward to the future.

## Employment in Action

Linda was a 57-year-old Tallahassee woman experiencing homelessness when she contacted the CareerSource Capital Region (CSCR) office for assistance. She felt in total despair after becoming homeless due to a car accident in 2018 that left her with disabling conditions. After a 25-year career with the State of Florida, she was unable to find employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Linda felt desperate and needed a job and resources to assist her in finding employment.

Upon registering for the COVID-19 Dislocated Workers Program, Linda was considered long-term unemployed and met the eligibility criteria for assistance. She was placed at the North Florida Women's Care temporary worksite as a Health Screener.

Prior to this placement, Linda had a difficult time finding permanent employment. She had applied for numerous jobs and had many interviews without success. While there were times she wanted to give up, she continued to maintain contact with the CSCR staff. Linda also attended several virtual professional development workshops and continued to work through her Employment Strategy Plan.

Today, Linda has achieved her personal goal of permanent employment. Because of the services available from the two COVID-19 Dislocated Worker Grants, Linda is thriving at her job, and now enjoys a permanent residence and financial stability.



## OFFICE OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH

MYFLFAMILIES.COM

The Department of Children and Families, Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH) fosters recovery-oriented approaches that go beyond the treatment setting and extend into recovery from mental health and substance use disorders. Accordingly, SAMH promotes the value of peer supports and advances employment services predominantly through two covered services: evidence-based supported employment, including Individual Placement and Support (IPS); and mental health Clubhouse services.

# 1,485

individuals received  
supported employment  
services!

State Fiscal Year	2019-20
Total Persons Receiving Services	248,322
Total Persons Receiving Employment Services	1,485
Average Annual Days Worked For Pay For SPMI*	73.35
Percent of SMI Competitively Employed**	36%

Source: Department of Children and Families' FASAMS database

\* This metric is limited to individuals who meet the criteria for severe and persistent mental illnesses.

\*\* This metric is limited to individuals who meet the criteria for serious mental illnesses.



## Cultivating Supported Employment

IPS is a highly successful evidence-based model of supported employment designed primarily for individuals with behavioral health conditions. IPS fosters a “recovery through work” philosophy and includes ongoing supportive services.

The Office of SAMH recognizes that employment is a critical element to long-term recovery and in March of 2021, Florida was one of seven states selected by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability and Employment Policy for the Advancing State Policy Integration for Recovery and Employment (ASPIRE) grant. Through technical assistance provided by the grant and collaboration from Vocational Rehabilitation, CareerSource Florida, the Agency for Health Care Administration, and SAMH, Florida is working to integrate and expand IPS in the state’s policy, program, and funding infrastructure.

The executive agencies have produced a strategic plan, established a steering committee, and selected two IPS early adopter sites. Plans for the remainder of the grant project include hiring an IPS trainer; aligning data collection elements and practices; and ensuring equal and equitable participation in IPS services.

## Fostering Mental Health Clubhouses

A Clubhouse is a community-based membership organization designed to support people living with mental illness. Typically, Clubhouses are open daily from morning to evening and include an employment component such as transitional, supported, and independent employment.

In FY2019-20, through legislative and Block Grant funding, SAMH allocated a total of \$1.5M to 13 existing Clubhouses to continue supported employment services. With this funding, Clubhouses provided employment services to 1,201 Floridians. Of those individuals served, 731 received pre-employment supports, and 280 received employment supports.

## Growing Opportunities for Certified Peer Support Specialists

SAMH supports implementation of community recovery support services such as peer supports and allocates funding to implement recovery community organizations (RCOs). RCO organizations are peer-run and provide recovery-focused community education, outreach, and peer-based recovery support services by employing peers. There are currently 38 RCOs at various stages of development across the state.

SAMH provides ongoing support for Certified Recovery Peer Specialist (CRPS) certification through scholarships, workforce skill enhancements, and system development. During FY2019-20, the Peer Support Coalition of Florida provided 106 participants with various trainings, including leadership development and recovery practices. In 2020, there were 684 CRPSs, an increase of 34% since 2015.

In addition, SAMH facilitates a quarterly statewide peer specialist job fair. During the event, there are presentations on peer services, and opportunities for relationship building for CRPS designees. Community service providers host virtual employer recruitment booths to meet directly with job seekers, resulting in hiring peer attendees.



The mission of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc., is to advocate and promote meaningful participation in all aspects of life for Floridians with developmental disabilities.

**140**  
individuals employed!

Federal Fiscal Year (10/1-9/30)	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2018-19	2019-20
<b>Total Employed</b>	137	249	248	168	119	110	180	140
<b>Project SEARCH</b>								
➤ Number completing program	DNA*	DNA*	138	189	151	159	250	235
➤ Percent completing program	92%	86%	87%	DNA*	83%	93%	93.3%	84%
➤ Number employed	137	235	230	109	101	110	174	140
➤ Percent employed	DNA*	68%	72%	58%	67%	9%	69.6%	59.6%

Source: Program Performance Report  
\*DNA-Data Not Available





## Project SEARCH Youth Model

The Project SEARCH High School transition program is a one-year internship program for students with disabilities that takes place in a business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as acquisition of employability and marketable work skills. This project is a great example of blended and braided funding among multiple state agencies and organizations, as well as businesses and Florida school districts. The project continues to expand in Florida and leads the nation with a total of 41 sites. Florida's annual employment outcomes for Project SEARCH had an 84% completion rate and a 59.6% employment rate for the 2019-2020 reporting period. Although Florida's employment rate was down, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the employment rate exceeded the national average.

A 2020 Project SEARCH graduate employed by the University of North Florida received national recognition by the Association of Persons Supporting Employment First (APSE) in their salute to essential workers!

Read the full story on the APSE website via the link below.

Berani (Florida) - NDEAM2020 - Association of People Supporting Employment First ([apse.org/berani-florida-ndeam2020](https://apse.org/berani-florida-ndeam2020))

## Employ Me 1st / Employment First Florida

### Employment First Florida Website

Through the Council's Employ Me 1st project, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) created and maintains a website for Employment First Florida. The website serves as a repository for materials and information; markets Employment First as the primary goal of all adult services; and provides a web presence to reflect and represent Florida's Employment First collaborative efforts. The website features the new Employment First Florida Employment Empowerment Toolkit, which supports local communities in Florida in prioritizing employment for individuals with disabilities. The Employment First website and Employment Empowerment Toolkit can be found at [www.employmentfirstfl.org](http://www.employmentfirstfl.org)

### Employment First Collaborative Pilots

Local level Employment First pilot sites, including the Nassau, Osceola, and Treasure Coast Interagency Councils, continued to work to support transition age youth in exploring and preparing for careers after high school. Supported by ICI, members of local teams provided input and feedback on development of the Employment Empowerment Toolkit and self-advocates assisted in providing tutorials on how to use the toolkit in 2020. The toolkit is designed to support job seekers, families, teachers, case managers, employment staff, and other direct support staff to make employment the first option for

all Floridians with disabilities. Made up of a series of short actionable plain language guides, the Employment Empowerment Toolkit is designed so that people can use it in their daily lives to support employment for people with disabilities. The guides are grouped by the type of user: job seekers, families, teachers, case managers, employment staff, and Adult Day Training staff.

### Employment First Collaborative Training

The Employment First partner agencies and organizations selected six sites in diverse areas of Florida to participate in the Employment First Collaborative Training (EFCT) Initiative. Participating organizations included Nassau County Transition; Adult and Community Education and Future Pathways (Leon County); Progressive Abilities Support Services (Hillsborough County); Inspire (Orange County); Center for Independent Living of Broward; and the Center for Independent Living of the Gulf Coast (Lee County and Southwest Florida). Using the EFCT toolkit, developed by The Center for Social Capital, Inc. dba Griffin-Hammis Associates, each site completed a self-assessment and used the results to develop a needs analysis and individualized plans to enhance leadership development and organizational change based on the needs of each site.

In 2019-20, a total of 80 people from the six sites participated in onsite training, technical assistance, and mentoring activities with at least 33 participants meeting all requirements for The Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) certificate!

Florida ARF is a 501(c)(3) organization that represents community human service provider agencies making a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities across the state. The Association also serves as the Central Nonprofit Agency that manages the RESPECT of Florida Program which creates job opportunities for individuals with disabilities who produce goods and services for governmental entities.

**1,181**  
 individuals employed!

Fiscal Year (10/1 – 9/30)	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Individuals Employed	1,201	1,246	1,198	1,181
Number in Competitive Employment	16	15	11	17
Number in Supported Employment	735	689	661	487

Source: RESPECT Annual Recertification Data.



## Legislative & Policy Concerns

Florida ARF, dba RESPECT of Florida, is the Central Nonprofit Agency that manages the RESPECT of Florida program authorized in Chapter 413, F.S. The concept is simple, RESPECT develops and manages an infra-structure that allows for Certified Employment Centers to sell commodities and/or services produced by individuals with severe disabilities or visual impairments.

Of the work performed by individuals employed through RESPECT resources during FY 2019-2020, the vast majority earn minimum wages or above with the average wage being \$10.43 per hour. About 76% of the individuals served worked at integrated work sites.

Access to transportation continues to be a barrier for achievement of positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

RESPECT Employment Centers and member agencies continue to move away from the use of 14(c) subminimum wage certificates.

## Microenterprise

Florida ARF, dba RESPECT of Florida, awarded two microenterprise grants in FY 2019-2020.

## Other Legislative & Policy Concerns

Florida ARF continued to work with stakeholders to develop a proposed service model that moves individuals out of day programs. The model, called Jobs for You, features integrated work sites, above minimum wage jobs, and a robust array of supports to meet the needs of individuals served regardless of the type of disability.

The Association hosts Affinity meetings for Employment Forum members to share and learn more about best practices for employment of individuals with disabilities.

The Association supported legislation the Legislature passed that added Pre-ETS language, addition of the 90-day service referral for Pre-ETS, reporting requirements, and amendment to the FRC and Able Trust.

The Association successfully advocated for more state resources that will enhance the VR programs' capability to obtain more federal funding and thereby serve more individuals.

## Employment Outcomes Professional (EOP) Training

Training is offered to prepare agency staff to enhance their employment placement skills with the end-goal being placement of more individuals in competitive jobs.

## Improving Economic Outcomes

As of FY 2019-2020, employees working through RESPECT Employment Centers and earning minimum wages or above totaled 988 individuals (84%). RESPECT average wage earnings increased from \$9.83 to \$10.43 per hour, compared to Florida's minimum wage standard of \$8.56 per hour.

## Collaborating for Employment Plan

Florida ARF continues to serve on the Employment First Interagency Collaborative Team and actively communicates the Employment First message to stakeholders.

## Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Florida ARF works with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) to develop transition opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The membership meets with the VR Director and Leadership Team to ensure compliance with WIOA guidelines and to discuss innovative service strategies. Redesign of the VR service delivery system continues to be a priority for member agencies who provide employment related services and supports.





## CONCLUSION

Florida's Employment First Partners continue to exemplify leadership, interagency collaboration and partnerships through their state-wide presence, support of collaborative events, and changes to operating policies and procedures. Florida's Employment First efforts are paving the way to better employment opportunities and outcomes for Floridians with disabilities and serve as a model for other states wishing to improve the employment of their citizens with disabilities!

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