



Minnesota

EMPLOYMENT
First

Mobilizing a Coalition of
Employment Champions

Fourth Annual
Employment First Summit

Saint Paul, Minnesota
September 30, 2011

“Employment First” is the vision of making employment the first priority and preferred outcome of people with disabilities.

Since 2007, the Minnesota Employment First Coalition has hosted employment summits, published summary reports and championed initiatives to increase workforce participation of Minnesotans with disabilities through changes in employment policy and practice.

- **June 2007: Summit I.** Participants included stakeholders from a variety of affinity groups and resulted in the Employment First Manifesto citing eight recommendations to promote competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. (<http://www.mnapse.org/Employment-First-Report.pdf>)
- **April 2008: Mini-Summit.** Participants included policymakers from local, state and federal government reporting on their current employment initiatives and identifying additional actions to support the recommendations of the Employment First Manifesto. (<http://www.mnapse.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/report-3-proof.pdf>)
- **November 2008: Summit II.** Participants included business leaders in the morning and participants from Summit I in the afternoon updating

progress since the initial summit in the Employment First Scorecard. (<http://www.mnapse.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/report-3-proof.pdf>)

- **April 2009:** The Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) is funded to support Employment First practices as recommended in the Manifesto. (<http://www.mntat.org/main/>)
- **July 2009:** The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is funded to support Employment First policy issues as recommended in the Manifesto. (<http://www.mn-epi.org/main/>)
- **May 2010: Summit III.** Participants included family members and self-advocates identifying strategies to mobilize and empower families to raise expectations about competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. (<http://www.mnapse.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/report-3-proof.pdf>)
- **September 2011: Summit IV.** Participants included 20 disability advocacy organizations working toward a collaborative action plan promoting Employment First based on the consensus recommendations from the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative.

We need everyone in
the workforce for
business to thrive and
communities to prosper.

Summit IV: Mobilizing a Coalition of Employment Champions

Work is a fundamental part of adult life for people with and without disabilities. It provides a sense of purpose, shaping who we are and how we fit into our community. Meaningful work has also been associated with positive physical and mental health benefits and is a part of building a healthy lifestyle as a contributing member of society. Because it is so essential to people's economic self sufficiency, as well as self esteem and well being, people with disabilities and older adults with chronic conditions who want to work should be provided the opportunity and support to work competitively within the general workforce in their pursuit of health, wealth and happiness. All individuals, regardless of disability and age, can work - and work optimally with opportunity, training, and support that build on each person's strengths and interests. Individually tailored and preference based job development, training, and support should recognize each person's employability and potential contributions to the labor market (*CMCS Informational Bulletin: Updates to the §1915 (c) Waiver Instructions and Technical Guide regarding Employment and Employment Related Services, September 16, 2011*).

This quote from a recent Informational Bulletin from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is remarkably consistent with the feedback from over 200 stakeholders participating in listening sessions in 2009 and 2010 facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative on why employment is important to Minnesotans with disabilities. It also reflects the values and principles published in the 2007 Manifesto of the Minnesota

Employment First Coalition defining “Employment First” as:

- expecting, encouraging, providing, creating, and rewarding regular integrated employment in the workforce
- at minimum or competitive wages and benefits
- as the first and preferred outcome for working-age youth and adults with disabilities
- especially for those with complex and significant disabilities, for whom job placement in the past has been limited, or has not traditionally occurred.

The Fourth Summit of the Employment First Coalition was held on September 30, 2011, as a continuation of the dialogues begun in 2009 and 2010 by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) around the question, “What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?” The 2011 MEPI Final Report identified 21 consensus recommendations across disability groups to promote employment as the preferred outcome of Minnesotans with disabilities (<http://www.mn-epi.org/docs/MEPIFinalReport2011.pdf>). Summit IV brought together 20 disability advocacy organizations to develop a collaborative action plan to prioritize and implement those consensus recommendations.

Having a job positively impacts mental health, physical health, social connections, economic stability, self-sufficiency and personal growth. It also increases state revenues and cuts the costs of benefit programs. It’s a win-win for all Minnesotans.

The participating organizations were:

Advocating Change Together

American Council of the Blind of Minnesota

The Arc Greater Twin Cities

The Arc of Minnesota

Autism Society of Minnesota

Brain Injury Association of Minnesota

Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities

Down Syndrome Association

Employment First Coalition

Epilepsy Foundation

Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Network of Minnesota

Metropolitan Center for Independent Living

Minnesota APSE

Minnesota Disability Law Center

Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities

Minnesota State Council on Disability

National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI Minnesota

National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota

National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Minnesota Chapter

PACER Center

The majority of Summit IV participants were from organizations which had hosted the listening sessions in 2009 and 2010. The focus of the Summit was to bring organizations together to develop a collaborative action plan on the primary recommendation from the MEPI Final Report:

- **To ensure that competitive employment is an expectation of Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them.**

“No one ever asked my child with a disability what he wanted to be when he grows up.”

Competitive employment is an expectation of citizens without disabilities, but that expectation is absent or “conditional” among many individuals with disabilities, families, educators, medical professionals, employment and disability professionals, and employers. The expectation of competitive employment is also not reflected in public policies.

The employment rate for individuals with disabilities reported by ODEP, the Office of Disability Employment Policy, is less than one-third that of people without disabilities (21% compared to 70% respectively). The Center for Economic Policy Research found 65% of individuals who experience poverty long-term have disabilities. Individuals living in poverty have less choice in controlling the circumstances of their lives. Competitive employment increases choices with respect to a wide array of personal, occupational, and economic goals available to any citizen. Economic power expands opportunities not otherwise available to many individuals with disabilities and those opportunities are directly related to measures increasing quality of life. Employment can be the pathway out of poverty,

and raising expectations about competitive employment is the first step. Everything starts or stops with that expectation.

About 30% of adults without disabilities do not participate in the workforce, and not all citizens with disabilities will work either. However, if competitive employment is an expected outcome of Minnesotans with disabilities, individuals (and their families where appropriate) can still choose to “opt out” of competitive or other employment, but the expectation would shift the dynamic embedded in the current system which requires individuals to “opt into” competitive employment in the face of significant pressure to choose a system of low paying and often segregated jobs or not to work at all.

Summit IV approached raising expectations about employment from two perspectives:

- **To identify the informational needs of Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them to make an informed choice about competitive employment.**
- **To explore policy changes to promote competitive employment through Employment First legislation.**

The morning session focused on informational needs about competitive employment. The attending disability organizations are a critical resource with direct connections to individuals with disabilities and their families. These organizations are positioned to better inform Minnesotans with disabilities about the benefits of working and to address major barriers

“In my over ten years of advocacy work, I never met anyone who didn’t want to work.”

and misconceptions about choosing competitive employment. Summit participants engaged in facilitated discussions focusing on which groups need information about competitive employment, what information they need and ways to disseminate that information. They emphasized that the message is key and that it would be beneficial to have a clearinghouse of common information with both factual information and personal stories to raise expectations about employment. Participants identified young adults in transition and those who support them as a particularly important target audience.

The afternoon session of the Summit focused on policy changes promoting competitive employment through legislative action. Employment First initiatives are underway in many states across the nation. The Minnesota Employment First Coalition, a grassroots movement of professionals, disability self-advocates, and family members, has sparked many of those initiatives through its 2007 Manifesto, technical planning support, and keynote addresses at Employment First Summits around the country. Five states have passed or proposed legislation. Seven have issued Employment First policy statements. An additional ten states, including Minnesota, have active Employment First initiatives.

Summit IV participants engaged in facilitated discussions about both the content of Employment First legislation and about next steps toward action in the 2012 legislative session. They discussed focusing across the broad spectrum of disability groups, the importance of informed choice about employment, the need for better coordination of services and integration of resources at local and state levels, and the importance of work-based learning and school to career transition practices for youth.

For next steps toward legislative action, some organizations indicated a desire to participate in drafting legislation, others in reviewing it and providing feedback, and others in working toward passage during the legislative

session. Organizations participating in Summit IV will have the opportunity to review potential legislation before making commitments of support.

As one of the final activities of the Summit, participants also selected their top priorities for future action from the additional recommendations in the MEPI Final Report. They identified the following as those priorities:

- Increase funding for public transportation, including Metro Mobility and other specialized transportation options, to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available.
- Ensure young adults with disabilities graduate directly and seamlessly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education.
- Redesign transition services for young adults aged 18-21 to produce better employment and postsecondary education outcomes through interagency collaboration.
- Conduct statewide public education about the economic benefits of competitive employment to Minnesotans with disabilities and the resources available to provide individualized guidance about maximizing earnings without jeopardizing the safety net of sustainable health care and independent living assistance.
- Incorporate customized employment strategies as an alternative to traditional job development approaches to address the many obstacles encountered by jobseekers with disabilities.

As a state, we value employment, and most people who are not employed are marginalized within our society. This is especially true of individuals with disabilities who as a group face some of the highest rates of unemployment. Summit IV, building on previous summits, was intended to continue moving toward the adopted value proposition “We need everyone in the workforce for business to thrive and communities to prosper.” Each summit results in

recommendations to continue the forward momentum begun with the 2007 Manifesto.

The recommendations below are intended to impact change through a top-down and bottom-up approach. Legislation and policy changes open the door to promote competitive employment from a public policy perspective. However, without grassroots support through disability organizations and others who support Minnesotans with disabilities and their families, many individuals will not consider competitive employment and its many benefits as an option to pursue, regardless of policy changes.

The following recommendations incorporate the suggestions on raising expectations about competitive employment discussed at the Summit. They also incorporate four out of five of the priorities identified by Summit participants from the 2011 MEPI Final Report by addressing transition, public benefits and customized employment. (The priority on public transportation is being addressed by a number of organizations which attended the Summit in collaboration with other groups who rely on public transportation.)

The goal is to
make Minnesota
a model for the
nation in
the competitive
employment of
all Minnesotans
with disabilities.

Summit IV Recommendations:

Develop information to better inform Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them about the benefits of competitive employment.

Areas to be addressed include:

- **work incentives to address concerns about losing public benefits,**
- **statistics, research and personal stories illustrating the contributions of individuals with disabilities in the workplace, and**
- **employment strategies, such as supported and customized employment, that can make the workplace accessible to individuals for whom competitive employment is often not even considered.**

This information would be available to disability advocacy organizations and others for distribution through their many networks and connections to Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them. It will provide a common message across Minnesota.

Develop legislation to promote Employment First policies and practices for the 2012 session of the Minnesota Legislature. The legislation that is developed will include the following components identified at Summit IV:

- **Having a broad focus across the spectrum of disability groups**
- **Including ways to ensure individuals make an informed choice about employment**
- **Promoting coordination among agencies**
- **Ensuring transition is an emphasis in legislation**
- **Identifying a process for implementing Employment First to identify specific policies which need to be added or changed, strategies to promote Employment First and measureable outcomes to determine progress**

The goal of the Employment First Coalition stated in the 2007 Manifesto has been to work toward a common framework for social and economic change. Its vision has been to create an economy and workforce in Minnesota where youth and adults with disabilities, including individuals with significant disabilities, have real opportunities to become competitively employed, use their talents and skills, work alongside other Minnesotans in the workforce,

and earn meaningful, competitive wages, thereby contributing to their self-support. Summit IV brings us one step closer to realizing that vision.

“I never thought my daughter could get to a job on her own or work independently. Now that she does, I’m waiting for the next amazing thing she will do.”

The Minnesota Employment First Coalition is:

Minnesota APSE - The Network on Employment

Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center

Advocating Change Together

Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Network of Minnesota

Minnesota Department of Education

Minnesota Department of Human Services

Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

Minnesota Disability Law Center

Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities

Minnesota State Council on Disability

PACER Center, Inc.

Pathways to Employment

Ramsey County Human Services

Social Security Administration

The Arc of Minnesota

The Arc Greater Twin Cities

University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD)

