



The Minnesota
EMPLOYMENT
First
A New Hope

Third Annual
Employment First Summit

Saint Paul, Minnesota
May 1, 2010

The Minnesota Employment First Coalition is:

- Minnesota APSE - The Network on Employment
- Minnesota Department of Education
- Pathways to Employment
- Minnesota Department of Human Services
- Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- Institute on Community Integration at University of Minnesota
- Social Security Administration
- Ramsey County Human Services
- The Consumer Survivor Network
- PACER Center
- Minnesota Training and Technical Assistance Center

Definition of Employment:

- Regular or customized employment in the workforce on the payroll of a company (unless self-employed) at minimum or prevailing wages and benefits
- Employment where integration and interaction with co-workers without disabilities and customers is assured

Summary of Employment First Summits

Event	Audience	Recommendations
Summit 1	Broad based: self-advocates, policy makers, employers, disability organizations, providers, educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish Minnesota as a national leader in promoting the employment of adults with disabilities. • Continue an ongoing dialogue and connection among Minnesota's Employment First champions. • Launch an Employment First vision and public policy for all Minnesotans living with disabilities. • Build on Minnesota's known & emerging strengths. • Launch "Communities of Practice" Demonstrations. • Develop training & technical assistance resources to redirect and execute an Employment First vision. • Rebranding "Rehabilitation" in Language and Practices. • Establish a single statewide definition for integrated employment, and initiate uniform practices of performance measurement across all state agencies and all disability service systems in Minnesota.
Summit 2	AM: Business leaders PM: Summit 1 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and implement the 3rd Annual Employment First Summit (focused on self-advocates and family members). • Launch four business mini-summits • Assist in Minnesota training and technical assistance needs • Support the development of Employment First Community Actions Teams (CATs) • Support Federal, State, and County Employment First Policy initiatives • Implement a uniform definition of employment and data collection practices in Minnesota • Maintain a focus on Employment First practices in secondary education. • Refresh existing collaborations and build new Employment First alliances. • Continue Minnesota's leadership role in the Employment First movement. • Launch a new corporation.

Introduction

On May 1, 2010, the Minnesota Employment First Coalition hosted its 3rd Employment Summit in Woodbury, MN. The Summit narrowed its focus for this event and targeted individuals with disabilities and their families as participants. The Summit was designed to be smaller and more participant friendly in its attempt to gather information from the participants. The invitation list was carefully developed to ensure that as many different disability populations as possible would be represented. Many of the individuals and family members represented transition age youth, though post transition adults were represented as well. Approximately half of the 100 invitees attended the event which was held on a Saturday to accommodate the schedules of busy families.

This Summit was the third in a series of Summits planned by the Minnesota Employment First Coalition. The first was held in 2007 and a series of eight recommendations was released in a document titled the Minnesota Employment First Manifesto. These recommendations were updated in 2008 at the second Summit. One of the updated recommendations was to hold a summit to elicit feedback and promote active participation by individuals with disabilities and their families.

The day began with a brief overview of work completed to date and a keynote speech from Chad and Sharon Schashl, who shared their journey toward Chad's employment from their unique perspectives. Participants were then strategically split into discussion groups facilitated by members of the Coalition.

Listening Session

The facilitators of each group were given four questions to help lead the discussion.

- 1. Tell us about whether your family did or did not choose employment for your child and why you made the choice you did.**

No one ever asked my child, "What would you like to be when you grow up?"

Nearly every participant reported that employment was always an expectation for their child or themselves. The consensus was they did not consider anything but work until they came in contact with others who told them that employment was either a very difficult option or impossibility. There were a myriad of reasons why employment was chosen.

Employment is such a major part of our overall societal structure so that a person who works is considered more valuable than one who doesn't. The more skills one has, the more money one can make. And having a job is generally accepted to contribute to one's overall well being.

Despite these strong foundational beliefs, many of the individuals stated they were not working or had never had a job in the community. The vast majority of the barriers mentioned had to do with the educational and

adult system either not having the resources or advising them to choose something other than work. Persistent, low expectations with respect to the employability of young adults with significant disabilities was perhaps best validated by a comment made by one parent attending the Summit event: "No one ever asked my child, 'What would you like to be when you grow up?'"

2. What resources do families need for employment to be an expectation for their child?

Far and away, the most common answer was that families do not get consistent information about how employment is possible for their child. Educators and social workers are the gatekeepers and unless they are "enlightened" to employment first principles, individuals are too often steered towards segregated programs. Individuals and families reported they were unaware and not informed about emerging practices in educational transition and customized employment that are widening opportunities to work in the competitive labor force with support.



Individuals and their families also need power over the professionals. Many of the participants reported a lack of control over the process or the desired outcomes, not to mention the funding. It was noted that while schools are including kids with disabilities, educators are not consistently promoting integrated employment in the workforce as the preferred outcome for these children. This fact is evident by the lack of paid employment experiences and outcomes in the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) of transition-aged youth and young adults.

Secondly, more resources (or the ability to utilize funding in a more creative way) are needed. Families are able to utilize support in the home in ways that fit work and family needs, but adult vocational services are too inflexible both practically and in policy (funding).

3. What next steps will you take toward "Employment First?"

Participants struggled with this question and many needed time to ponder what their next steps would be. Many people noted they need to take charge of their situation. Reliance on the system has led to poor results. It was felt that connecting with others in similar situations would benefit everyone. With a stronger demand for employment, providers will be forced to shift their focus toward integrated, customized practices which lead to individualized job outcomes in the community workforce.

4. How can Employment First Coalition help families make employment the preferred outcome for their children?

There was a call for more training, an information hub, and further coalition building in both diversity and quantity. Participants were excited to hear about the work of the Minnesota Training and Technical

Assistance Center (MNTAT) and Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) and felt more Community Action Teams were needed. It was further suggested more training is needed for employers, as well as increased awareness of the financial incentives that already exist.

The family members acknowledged they often experience battle fatigue. They also noted they are responsible for the outcomes they accept. They stated strongly that the Summit was a motivational event that inspired them to take greater levels of action for their loved ones.



Chad and Sharon Schashi

Recommendations

The conversation and the work must continue

At every employment first summit, participants expressed the desire to continue the conversation and subsequently the work being done. Family members expressed appreciation for the work done by the Minnesota Employment First Coalition and wanted to ensure that the work would continue. The Summits focused primarily on how to impact the lives of young people in transition from school to work, but the impact can be felt beyond this select group of people.

Power needs to be in the hands of individuals and their families

Over the course of the past decade, the ability to direct funds by consumers and their families has gradually eroded. The Consumer Directed Community Support option still exists but families must now pay for vocational choices out of a smaller budget if they use the CDCS option. In addition, the service delivery system for both children and adults with disabilities is extremely complicated which has left too many parents at the mercy of the professionals. Clearly far too few professionals are helping individuals choose work, as the limited data shows.

Public education needs to put more emphasis on employment/post-secondary education and training

Too many students with disabilities leave school without the job-related and academic skills required to succeed in the workforce or in postsecondary education. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 offered a promising approach to this issue and required major school restructuring. The current mantra, "College and Career Ready" is the goal of high school reform. Do students in Minnesota have the skills that employers need? Modernizing the educational systems by preparing students for success in the workforce and postsecondary education will be a means to bolster the economy in Minnesota. It is our recommendation that students with disabilities are competitively employed, enrolled in postsecondary education, or both, within 12 months of leaving high school.

Centralized information

Family members talked about experiencing the "transition cliff." This occurs when their young adults leave secondary education and the family is left with minimal information and guidance about navigating a complex system of adult services. Participants expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the amount of information that is available and

also the wide degree of difference from experts in the fields. By having one single point of entry, families could research options, get advice from others, and potentially eliminate the confusion. It is also recommended policies be established to support families in developing critical linkages as well as coordination with secondary and post-secondary education programs and adult disability and employment service providers (as appropriate) to support a goal of "seamless transition" into paid, integrated employment.

Training on employment

Time and again, participants expressed the need for training about employment. While many organizations have tried to offer information to families regarding transition issues and employment, few people have taken advantage of these opportunities. The advocacy organizations appear to have gotten the best response to the training opportunities that they offer and so it is recommended that the Minnesota Employment First Coalition work with the advocacy organizations to offer training on employment outcomes that meets the definition offered in the Manifesto.

Community Action Teams

Teams are being formed under the watch of the MN Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT). It is recommended families form their own Community Action Teams as part of utilizing their social networks to develop employment and helpful partnerships in support of young adults with disabilities.

Final Thoughts

Despite years of research, anecdotes, and countless demonstration projects that have shown not only that people with complex disabilities can work in the community but can do so for competitive wages far greater than in segregated settings, the employment rate of this same group has remained unchanged.

As young people with disabilities reach the typical working age, they will have a choice to make. They can opt for utilizing school based, vocational rehabilitation, waiver supports, or other formal systems in their quest for employment. This system will give them a 20% chance of being employed in a community job at minimum wage or better.

Or they can opt for something outside of the formal system. By building and utilizing a social network, they will have opportunities to create a job and potentially a career that focuses on their strengths and minimizes their need for support.

Throughout history, but especially over the past 50 years, change has often come from the youth of society. Whether it be fashion, music, education, or civil rights, the young people have led the way. While change is difficult for some, eventually the new way becomes the norm and is readily accepted by most. The goal of the MN Employment First Coalition is to make employment the preferred outcome for people with disabilities. If this is to occur, young people with disabilities and their families will need to embrace the concept of Employment First and insist on something different.

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Pathways
TO EMPLOYMENT