

Montana Employment First Paper



Purpose

This document reflects the shared commitment of Montana state agencies and partners to ensure that people with disabilities have real opportunities to work, belong, and live meaningful lives in their communities. Employment First guides how public systems support employment and inclusion across Montana.

What Employment First Means

Employment First is **not a program**. It is a **commitment and guiding approach**.

Employment First means that:

- Working in the community is the **first and preferred option** for people with disabilities.
- Employment happens alongside people without disabilities.
- Employment supports independence, dignity, and community belonging.

Employment First does **not mean “employment only”**. People have the right to work and the right to participate in community, education, recreation, and civic life—with or without supports.

Employment First in Montana

Montana’s rural and frontier geography requires flexible and creative approaches to employment. Distance, transportation, and local economies affect job access. To address this, Montana is expanding options such as telework, self-employment, and community-based jobs that reflect how and where people choose to live.

What Is Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)?

Competitive, Integrated Employment means work that is:

- **Competitive:** Paid at or above minimum wage with the same pay and benefits as coworkers without disabilities.
- **Integrated:** Performed in community settings where people with and without disabilities work together.
- **Employment:** Includes wage employment, self-employment, and entrepreneurship that promote independence and economic stability.

Montana’s Employment-First Vision

Montana believes every person has strengths and talents that contribute to their community and the economy. Employment is both a civil right and a key driver of health, independence, and community well-being.

Employment First Means Public Systems Will:

- Recognize CIE as the priority outcome for working-age people with disabilities.
- Invest in services that support community-based employment rather than segregated settings.
- Ensure equitable access to services, supports, healthcare, and benefits.
- Support people to work while receiving disability benefits when needed.

MONTANA EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Guiding Principles

- **Zero Exclusion:** Everyone is presumed capable of work.
- **Self-Determination and Choice:** Individuals choose their goals and career paths.
- **Dignity of Risk and Growth:** Learning and growth come from real experiences.
- **Person-Centered and Strengths-Based:** Supports are tailored to the individual.
- **CIE First:** Real jobs, real wages, real inclusion.
- **Employment Supports Health:** Work improves mental and physical health.

Aligning Services and Systems

Making Employment First real requires alignment across services, expectations, and systems. Employment and skill-building services must lead toward real jobs and community participation. Agencies and Tribal partners must coordinate policy, funding, training, and data so employment and inclusion become the standard—not the exception.

Employment First and Community Life

Employment is central to inclusion, but it is not the whole picture. Community Life Engagement supports people to build skills, relationships, and confidence through education, volunteering, recreation, and civic participation—before, during, and beyond paid employment.

The Path Forward

Montana is advancing Employment First through coordinated initiatives, policy updates, and cross-agency collaboration. A statewide Employment First Workgroup is guiding this effort and will develop an action plan by May 2026 to strengthen services, align systems, and expand access to competitive, integrated employment for all Montanans with disabilities.

