

MONTANA EMPLOYMENT FIRST WHITE PAPER



DEPARTMENT OF
**PUBLIC HEALTH &
HUMAN SERVICES**



MONTANA EMPLOYMENT FIRST WHITE PAPER

This document reflects a collaborative effort between the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Vocational Rehabilitation and statewide partners committed to advancing *Employment First* principles. Together, these organizations and individuals are focused on ensuring that Montanans with disabilities have every opportunity to pursue **Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)** and live meaningful lives in their communities.

Employment First is not a program. *Employment First* is a commitment, philosophy, and framework that **employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome of publicly funded services for all working-age Montanans with disabilities**. It also recognizes that employment exists within a broader life of community connection and engagement. Employment First **does not mean Employment Only**. It means that people have the right to work and the right to participate in civic, educational, recreational, and social life with or without accommodation.

To advance Employment First in a rural and frontier state like Montana, we must be innovative in our approach to employment, taking into consideration how and where Montanans choose to live. In a state where distance, transportation, and local economies influence access to employment, it is essential to be creative in expanding opportunities such as telework and community-based jobs.

Defining Competitive Integrated Employment

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) means work that is:

1. **Competitive**

Paid at or above minimum wage, with wages and benefits equal to those received by co-workers without disabilities for similar work.

2. **Integrated**

Occurring in community settings where employees with and without disabilities interact as peers, with opportunities for advancement.

3. **Employment**

Including self-employment and entrepreneurship, leading to self-sufficiency, independence, and dignity.

Montana's Employment-First Vision

Montana's *Employment First* framework is built on the belief that every person has talents, interests, and capacities that can contribute to their community and the economy. Employment is both a **civil right** and an **economic driver** that strengthens families, communities, and businesses.

Employment First means public systems will align policy, funding, and practice to ensure:

- Competitive, Integrated Employment (CIE) shall be recognized as the initial, preferred and priority outcome for all working-age Montanans with disabilities.
- Services are administered and financed in a manner that prioritizes opportunities for employment and community participation in integrated settings rather than segregated or facility-based services.
- Individuals with disabilities must have equitable access to the services, supports, healthcare, and pathways necessary to pursue their chosen goals related to employment, independence, and community inclusion.
- A person is able to receive disability benefits and enjoy a career.

Guiding Principles

ZERO EXCLUSION

Everyone is presumed capable of work and contribution

SELF DETERMINATION AND INFORMED CHOICE

Individuals control their career path and goal

DIGNITY OF RISK AND GROWTH

People learn and grow through real experiences

PERSON-CENTERED, STRENGTHS-BASED

Supports are tailored to the individual

CIE IS THE FIRST AND PREFERRED OUTCOME

Real jobs, real wages, real inclusion

EMPLOYMENT IS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH

Employment improves both mental health as well as physical and financial health

Aligning Services, Expectations, and Systems

Achieving Montana's Employment First vision requires more than policy commitment—it demands a coordinated transformation of **services, expectations, and systems**.

- **Services:** Employment and skill building in day services must be designed and delivered in ways that support individual choice with the end goal of competitive integrated employment and community life.
- **Expectations:** We presume that all Montanans with disabilities can work in competitive integrated employment settings. Employment and inclusion shall be viewed as the standard—not the exception.
- **Systems:** State agencies, Tribal Governments, and Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation must align policy, funding, training, and data collection to reinforce these expectations. This includes coordinated rate structures, cross-agency planning, and integrated data systems that track outcomes in employment and community participation.

Embedding these elements across Montana's service infrastructure ensures Employment First becomes the organizing principle—not an isolated initiative.

Employment First Does Not Mean Employment Only

Employment is a cornerstone of inclusion but not the whole structure. Community Life Engagement (CLE) is the companion to Employment First, ensuring that individuals:

- Build skills and social networks through volunteerism, education, and recreation.
- Participate in civic and cultural life.
- Enjoy total person health, physical and mental.
- Develop the confidence, relationships, and experiences that lead to work and community belonging.

CLE creates meaningful opportunities for growth and connection before, during, and beyond paid employment.

Montana's Momentum for Systems Change

Montana's Employment First initiative builds upon a foundation of **recent policy and systems-level progress** demonstrating the state's commitment to expanding inclusive employment opportunities and aligning public investments to achieve them.

- **406 Jobs Executive Order:** Governor Gianforte's 406 Jobs initiative provides a statewide framework for targeting workforce development resources across six key industries. Through this initiative, Montana VRBS and its partners are expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in high-demand fields and community-based employment.
- **Olmstead Commitment:** The Olmstead decision reaffirmed that individuals with disabilities have the right to live and work in the most integrated settings possible. Montana's strategic planning and Employment First efforts advance this principle by prioritizing competitive, integrated employment and community participation over segregated models of service delivery.
- **NEON Project Partnership with ODEP:** Montana's participation in the National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON), led by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), has accelerated cross-agency collaboration and policy alignment. The NEON initiative provides Montana with technical assistance to strengthen data integration, rate structures, and policy coordination to promote Competitive, Integrated Employment (CIE).
- **Policy Modernization and Provider Capacity:** Montana VR is reviewing and revising internal policies to reflect the principles of Employment First prioritizing evidence-based and research-informed models. This focus includes building the capacity of providers statewide to deliver these services with fidelity and quality, ensuring individuals receive the supports necessary to achieve CIE.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate a unified state effort to align services, expectations, and systems toward a single goal: expanding access to integrated employment and full community participation for all Montanans with disabilities.

Montana's Path Forward: The Employment First Workgroup & Action Plan

To translate Montana's Employment First vision into actionable change, MT VR has convened a Montana Employment First Working Group, composed of representatives from key state agencies (e.g., VRBS, DPHHS, Medicaid, Office of Public Instruction), provider networks, tribal representation, self-advocates, and families.

Mission of the Working Group:

- Guide and oversee the implementation of Employment First reforms across Montana.
- Develop a coherent, phased **Action Plan** by **July 2026** that lays out priority strategies, timelines, and accountability measures.
- Serve as the cross-agency governance body that ensures alignment of policy, funding, and practice.

Montana is already making progress through strong collaboration across various programs, yet challenges remain:

- Limited provider capacity and transportation options, including in rural regions.
- Gaps in assistive technology and benefits planning.
- Misalignment between vocational rehabilitation, Medicaid, and workforce systems.
- Continued reliance on facility-based or segregated models.

Call to Action

Montana's Employment First initiative represents a shared commitment to equality, dignity, and economic opportunity. It asks every system—education, Medicaid, workforce, vocational rehabilitation, and industry—to work in alignment toward two clear goals:

1. A Montana where every person with a disability can live, work, and contribute as a valued member of their community.
2. A Montana where industry has the opportunity to grow and thrive, with access to high quality talent.

Inclusion and community engagement are foundational to the success of Employment First in Montana.

To move forward, Montana will:

- **Reinvest Public Funds**

Prioritize community-based employment and engagement.

- **Incentivize High Quality Employment Outcomes**

Measured by wages, hours, and benefits.

A process in place to track expectations and outcomes.

- **Coordinate Funding**

Vocational rehabilitation, Medicaid, and workforce systems coordinate funding to ensure supported and customized employment.

- **Strengthen Provider Resources**

Strengthen provider access and technical assistance in evidence-based practices.

- **Enhance Data Systems**

Track outcomes through coordinated and consistent data to ensure accountability.

- **Engage Individuals, Families, Providers, and Employers**

Educate stakeholders on the value proposition of competitive, integrated employment and what they can do to achieve it across Montana and in alignment with important initiatives such as 406 Jobs.

RESOURCES:

1. Lavin, Don. (2025) The Death of Rehabilitation or Lighting New Pathways to Inclusive Working Life,
2. Iowa's Employment 1st White Paper

Appendix A:

Montana Employment First Working Group Members

NAME	BIOGRAPHY
Crystal Armstrong	Crystal Armstrong currently serves as the Workforce Services Administrator for the Montana Department of Labor & Industry, where she demonstrates strong leadership and expertise in the public policy sector. In addition to her role in workforce development, she is an adjunct professor at Creighton University's Heider College of Business, teaching graduate-level courses in conflict, negotiation, and conflict systems. Crystal is deeply committed to her work and driven by a passion for creating positive impact in both her professional and academic pursuits.
Shannon Cole-Merchen	Shannon Cole-Merchen serves as the Bureau Chief for the Developmental Disabilities Program (DDP) at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). She recently transitioned into this leadership role after serving as the Community Services Supervisor. Since joining DDP in 2006, Shannon has held a variety of roles that have deepened her expertise in service delivery, policy development, and systems improvement. Her career has been driven by a strong passion for advancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
Ellen Condon	Ellen is the Project Co-Director for the Rural Institute's Transition & Employment Projects and the Montana DeafBlind Project at the University of Montana, where she has worked since 1996 on Transition and Employment for youth with significant disabilities.
Lacey Conzelman	Lacey is the Program Supervisor managing in several areas of VRBS: Extended Employment, Ticket to Work, Community Rehabilitation Programs, and State Plan.
Wayne Dagle	Wayne Dagle serves as the director of the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Technical and Training Center (AIVRTTAC) project, and a first-generation descendant of the Romsa family of the Blackfeet Tribe. Bringing over 20 years of experience in vocational rehabilitation, he has served as a project director, VR counselor, and national trainer, developing and managing disability and employment-focused programs across Indigenous communities. Wayne also owns Perspectives Counseling & Consulting, where he provides therapy and training with a focus on generational trauma, PTSD, and their impact on Native populations.
Christa Gabriel	Christa is an experienced advocate for disability rights, with a strong focus on public policy. She is the Director of Public Policy at Disability Rights Montana and is passionate about supporting people with disabilities and working toward meaningful, lasting change whether that's through legislation, community partnerships, or amplifying voices.
Kathy Hampton	Kathy Hampton was a disability advocate and Client Assistance Program (CAP) advocate for Disability Rights Montana for almost 27 years. In her work, she was active in monitoring for abuse/neglect concerns in group homes, adult mental health facilities, and youth residential treatment centers in the State. Kathy also did Representative Payee site reviews of payees for Social Security beneficiaries for several years.

MONTANA EMPLOYMENT FIRST WHITE PAPER

NAME	BIOGRAPHY
Chanda Hermanson	Chanda is the Director of Montana Combined Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), bringing nearly 20 years of professional experience and a lifelong personal connection to the field. Growing up in a family deeply involved in vocational rehabilitation, Chanda began volunteering at the Montana Youth Leadership Forum at 19, sparking her passion for serving individuals with disabilities. Under her leadership, Montana VR has advanced innovative approaches to service delivery across a rural state, including legislative support for counsellors, expanded telecommunications access, and the creation of a Blind Adjustment program. Guided by both personal and professional commitment, Chanda continues to champion meaningful employment opportunities and stronger supports for people with disabilities.
Josh Kendrick	Josh Kendrick CEO of Opportunity Resources, Inc. (ORI). Kendrick is an active Missoula community member, serving on various committees and boards over the last decade, including the Special Olympics, CASA of Missoula and the Missoula Chamber of Commerce. He has held various positions within ORI during the last 19 years, including Director of Services and Chief Operations Officer.
Patrick Maddison	Patrick Maddison serves as the CEO for Flathead industries, as well as the Board President for the Montana Association of Community Disability Services (MACDS). With a strong background in social work-related fields, and now serving in the nonprofit sector, Patrick has a strong affinity for advocacy related efforts, understanding the legislation, and empowering people with disabilities to live independently and thrive.
Lynn McHann	Lynn is with the Montana Family Support Services Advisory Council.
Diane Reidelbach	Diane Reidelbach is the Executive Director of Job Connection, bringing more than 25 years of experience in Supported Employment in the Billings area. She is a dedicated advocate for Employment First initiatives throughout Montana and has made significant contributions to advancing opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Diane has been actively involved in three major rate studies that resulted in critical increases for employment services, highlighting her commitment to strengthening the field. In addition to her role at Job Connection, Diane serves as Vice President of the Montana Association of Community Disability Services, reflecting her ongoing dedication to community-based supports. Outside of her professional life, she enjoys growing fruit trees and shrubs, wood turning and has a quirky (but necessary) hobby of designing and building unique outhouses.
Jean and Jordan-Schroeder	Jean Schroeder is the Project Coordinator at the Montana Empowerment Center, Montana's Parent Training and Information Center. She is extensively involved in connecting families of children and young adults (up to age 26) with disabilities to secondary transition programs and supports available in Montana. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology and has over 26 years of experience, both professionally and personally, working with people with disabilities in different capacities. She has extensive experience working with families who have children with disabilities. She has worked previously as a Family Support Specialist, helping families get connected and navigate through Montana Part C, connecting to Part B (school) and Family Education and Support services. She has also been a case manager for children being served by the 0208 Waiver, formerly known as the Children's Medicaid Waiver. She is also a parent of an adult son with a disability. Jordan Schroeder is the creator of the annual Jordan's Pumpkins for a Cause event in Vaughn, Montana, which raises funds for local non-profit by selling pumpkins from his farm. To date Pumpkins for a Cause has raised nearly \$70,000.

MONTANA EMPLOYMENT FIRST WHITE PAPER

NAME	BIOGRAPHY
Allyson Talaska	Allyson Talaska is the Bureau Chief of Field Services at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, where she has built a decade-long career advancing public health and human services in Missoula, Montana. She holds a Master of Science in Clinical Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling from West Virginia University and brings deep hands-on expertise from her background as a counselor, supervisor, and case manager in community mental health settings.
Ryan Van Ballegooyen	Ryan Van Ballegooyen is the Bureau Chief of the Job Service Bureau at the Montana Department of Labor and Industry.
Cassie Wick	Cassie Wick is the Public Policy and Grassroots Advocacy Coordinator for Ability Montana, the Center for Independent Living serving the 14 counties in Southwest Montana. She has been a passionate disability rights advocate for almost 20 years. She has worked alongside countless individuals to identify and accomplish their personal goals. She enjoys advocating to increasing accessibility and quality of life in the communities she serves.
Crystal Wright	Crystal Wright serves as a Special Education School Improvement Specialist at the Montana Office of Public Instruction, where she aids administrators, educators, parents, and students throughout the state by facilitating the implementation, evaluation, and sharing of special education practices.
Greg Zadina	Greg Zadina is the CEO of Montana Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Founder and CEO of Summit Strategic Solutions. Greg is dedicated to empowering nonprofits and small businesses to achieve their mission-driven goals through strategic business development and innovative solutions.
Ashlea Lantz, The Harkin Institute	Ashlea Lantz has specialized in disability employment initiatives for the past 20 years, leading services, consulting on state and federal contracts, and building long-term partnerships with organizations across the public and private sectors. Ashlea brings expertise in customized employment and certified benefits planning, helping individuals and organizations navigate complex systems to create meaningful, sustainable workforce solutions. She has helped Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) to build capacity by developing high-performing teams. As a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC), she integrates person-centered practices with policy and program innovation.
Bob Ludke, The Harkin Institute	Over his career Bob Ludke has advised policymakers in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, taught at the United States International University in Nairobi, Kenya, and provided counsel on disability employment, sustainability, corporate governance, and supply chain management strategies for companies across the global economy. Bob also is the author of two books - Case Studies in Disability-Driven Innovation and Transformative Markets.
SueAnn Morrow, PhD, The Harkin Institute	Technically retired, Dr. Morrow has a long professional career. She served as a teacher of students with learning disabilities, became a special education consultant, was the principal of a self-contained school and later became Director of Special Education. After finishing her doctorate, she co-founded with her husband EDGE, Inc. a non-profit community rehabilitation program (CRP) serving adults with disabilities, focusing on employment, community living, and behavioral interventions.