



Collaborating with Other Partners in the Developmental Disabilities Network and Beyond to Further *Employment First* Systems Change

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Introduction

A good question to start with is not *if* your Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) should be working to increase employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, but rather *how* your Council can collaborate with other partners to advance the *Employment First* movement in your state. Whether your state has many *Employment First* partners and has been part of the movement for a long time, or your state is newer in its journey, Councils can play a critical role in bringing people together and making positive changes. If we start with the assumption that *Employment First* is an integral part of your Council’s mission, it is just a matter of figuring out what your unique role is.

The [Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000](#) (which is often called the “DD Act” for short) includes among its “areas of emphasis” that Councils are required to evaluate in their 5-Year State Plan a focus on employment-related activities. The DD Act defines employment-related activities as, “advocacy, capacity building, and systemic change activities that result in individuals with developmental disabilities acquiring, retaining, or advancing in paid employment, including supported employment or self-employment, in integrated settings in a community.” In other words, *Employment First* has been part of Council DNA since the very beginning. This resource will help you figure out how your Council can reach full potential as an *Employment First* partner in your state.



Learning Objectives

- Identify key Employment First partners in your state.
- Explore strategies you can pursue with Employment First partners.
- Create a plan to establish or strengthen your Council's unique role in working with other Employment First partners.

Identifying *Employment First* Partners

It is helpful to think about your state's *Employment First* movement as an ecosystem with many partners who each play a different role and depend on each other to be successful. Each partner has different strengths, resources, and perspectives to contribute, and they are all equally important to the movement. As you think about how your Council will contribute to the *Employment First* movement, you can start by identifying the various *Employment First* partners in your state and assessing your relationship with them.

Some of these partners may already be directly involved with creating employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, and some of them may not yet realize the significant role they can play. Similarly, you may already have deep connections with some of these partners, and there may be others with which you are unfamiliar. Wherever your Council stands with a particular partner, it is helpful to consider a number of important questions early on (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Key Questions in Assessing Current or Potential Partnerships to Expand or Strengthen Council Efforts to Promote *Employment First* Systems-Change



The following guide provides you with some strategies for framing and building effective partnerships with key stakeholders to support your *Employment First* systems change efforts. This is not an exhaustive list of *Employment First* partners and there may be others you work with who



are not listed here. If you have not already done so, your Council should engage in community partnership and resource mapping to understand who your current and potential partners are, what contributions they can make, and how to bring them together to make positive change. **Engage as many partners as possible in resource mapping activities because you never know who has unique resources to bring to the table.** And remember, one of the most important roles a Council plays is that of convener. Councils often bring people together to solve problems and the *Employment First* movement creates many opportunities to do just that!

Self-Advocates

You have probably heard the saying, “[Nothing about us without us!](#)” In the context of *Employment First*, this means there should not be any conversations or decisions happening about employing people with developmental disabilities without securing a seat at the table for self-advocates, centering their perspectives and experiences, and taking direction from them at every possible opportunity. If you look around a table (or, in recent times, a virtual platform meeting space) and realize there are not any people with developmental disabilities, or not enough of them to have a genuine diversity of perspectives, it is important to acknowledge their absence and figure out a way to create a more inclusive and diverse space as quickly as possible. Even if it means rescheduling a meeting or delaying the work, it is critical to ensure self-advocates are always at the frontlines of the *Employment First* movement. Most states have at least one statewide self-advocacy organization, and often there are several smaller regional chapters. It can also be helpful to talk with your own Council members to identify self-advocates who not only care about *Employment First*, but who also understand what your Council is trying to accomplish.



Parents and Family Members

Parents and other family members of people with developmental disabilities are crucial allies in the *Employment First* movement. Most of them have spent their entire adult lives (if not longer) advocating for their family members with developmental disabilities. They bring important perspectives, experiences, and history with the service delivery system. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that sometimes there can be tensions between self-advocates and family members, especially family members who care for people with developmental disabilities with higher levels of need who may not be able to advocate for themselves as strongly as other self-advocates. This can create a challenging dynamic in your *Employment First* conversations, but fortunately your Council is in a perfect position to bring people together, validate and understand different perspectives, find common ground, and figure out ways to work together productively. Many parents and family members are already *Employment First* champions, and some may have different experiences with employment that are not as progressive, integrated, or inclusive. For example, some of them may have supported their family members during an era when sheltered workshops and other segregated day programming models were the norm. For these family



members, instead of dismissing their experiences or perspectives out of hand, it is important to try to understand where they are coming from and find ways to give them education, experience, and exposure to *Employment First*.

Employment Providers

Employment providers are a natural ally in the *Employment First* movement. Their mission is to increase employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities and they play a critical role in translating philosophy and policy into positive outcomes. If your state has an association or coalition of employment providers, that is an excellent place for your Council to establish and strengthen relationships. There may be some employment providers in your state who still operate and advocate for sheltered workshops and other segregated models. While it is important to stay true to your Council's mission and *Employment First* values, these providers should not be completely dismissed because they are still an important member of the *Employment First* systems-change efforts. You will need their buy-in and commitment to transform their business model to one that offers services that support individuals with disabilities achieve and maintain competitive, integrated employment (CIE). Your Council should spend time with these providers to understand their perspectives and gradually help them understand and embrace the *Employment First* philosophy. *Employment First* efforts can fail if you haven't engaged these entities into the process.



State Agencies

There are several state agencies that play a direct or indirect role in the *Employment First* movement and your Council is uniquely positioned to cultivate strong relationships with them. Agencies vary by state, but *Employment First* often includes the agency that provides direct services to people with developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation (VR), the Medicaid agency, the workforce system, and the mental/behavioral health agency. Each of these agencies play a direct role in setting and implementing policies about the employment of people with developmental and other significant disabilities. There are other state agencies that play a less direct role in employing people with developmental disabilities but can be important partners in the *Employment First* movement. For example, most states have a state agency that focuses on business or economic development, which is usually responsible for creating a business-friendly environment and serving as a connection point with new and expanding businesses. Your Council could establish or strengthen a relationship with this agency to help them understand the value of hiring people with developmental disabilities and figure out ways for them to help share the message with the many businesses they work with daily. Most Councils are part of the state government, which means you can open doors and create spaces for state agencies that other organizations cannot do as easily.



Businesses

Councils can play a helpful role in engaging with the business community and cultivating *Employment First* champions among them. For example, Councils can spend time with business groups, attend chamber of commerce meetings, and join other meetings or events where businesses are talking about their workforce needs. Your state may even have a business coalition focused on the employment of job-seekers with disabilities. Your Council can provide important education and resources to businesses about the value of hiring people with developmental disabilities. You may also be able to create helpful connections between businesses and employment providers, state agencies, and other *Employment First* partners.



Policy Makers



Legislators, legislative staff, and your Governor’s Office are all critical partners in the *Employment First* movement. Your state likely has at least a few policy makers who are *Employment First* champions, and perhaps your state has an executive order or legislation pertaining to *Employment First*. However, chances are there are many elected policy makers who still need to be educated about *Employment First*. Fortunately, because of your Council’s role with advocacy and public policy, you are perfectly positioned to educate policy makers and connect them with other *Employment First* partners. Policy makers will often look to Councils for guidance and opinions about public policy issues like *Employment First*, so it is good to make sure you are continually strengthening your relationships with them. For example, if your Governor’s Office has policy advisors who specialize in developmental disabilities or human services generally, you should be meeting with them regularly. You can also look at the various committees in your state’s House of Representatives and Senate to identify which of them cover issues related to *Employment First*. You can cultivate relationships with the leaders of these committees and their legislative staff. Once again, because of your Council’s unique position at the intersection of advocacy, public policy, and state government, you can open doors and create spaces that others cannot.

DD Network Partners

You should view your fellow DD Network Partners as valuable members of the *Employment First* movement in your state. This includes your state’s Protection and Advocacy (P&A) organization and the University Center on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). Although it may seem obvious that your DD Network Partners should be involved in the *Employment First* movement with you, sometimes it is challenging to figure out what their specific roles could be. If you are unsure what their position is on *Employment First* or what resources they may contribute, take this perfect opportunity to start a conversation with them about it. If they are not already contributing to your state’s *Employment First* movement, chances are they will be eager to work with your Council to identify some roles they can play, no matter how big or small.





Critics and Opponents

It may not be quite as obvious, but it is important to work with people and groups who are critical or skeptical of the *Employment First* movement. They have the potential to create challenges for your work whether you have relationships with them or not, so it is better to get to know them, try to understand their perspectives, and gradually expose them to ideas and stories that may change their way of thinking. It is especially helpful to be in tune with their advocacy efforts that affect or damage your work, and the best way to do that is to build bridges instead of burning them. To be clear, this does not mean your Council should compromise its values or dilute the principles of the *Employment First* movement. Rather, it is important to recognize that critics and opponents are key members of your *Employment First* ecosystem whether you like it or not, and Councils are uniquely positioned to find common ground and move people forward together in productive ways.

Strategies to Consider with *Employment First* Partners

Once you have identified the current and potential *Employment First* partners you will be working with, it is time to start considering the projects you can work on together. Below is a non-exhaustive list of strategies that are most effectively accomplished in collaboration with other partners.



Data Collection

There are many *Employment First* states, and most of them have some kind of executive order or legislative mandate to that effect, but very few states have data collection systems that can clearly and effectively track the employment outcomes of people with developmental disabilities. There are a variety of reasons for this shortcoming, which is not for a lack of desire or trying. Legal, financial, and logistical barriers make it difficult for *Employment First* partners to collect, analyze, and share data in effective ways. This is exactly the kind of challenge your Council may be positioned to address. You could consider convening multiple partners who independently track employment data (or could be tracking it) and facilitate discussions to negotiate an agreement for how data will be collected and shared. Some states have accomplished this using a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other similar document, but there are other ways of accomplishing it. As the old saying goes, what gets measured gets done, and if your Council can help *Employment First* partners more effectively collect and use data to advance the movement, that will be a big win!

Memoranda of Understanding (MOU)

Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) or other similar documents are another way your Council can engage *Employment First* partners in meaningful conversations to accomplish a collective goal. Some MOUs are centered around data collection and/or data sharing agreements, while some MOUs are focused



on outlining roles and responsibilities for how state agencies will support people with developmental disabilities at various stages of their employment journey. Whatever the objective of the MOU, your Council is in a strong position to bring together relevant partners, clearly articulate the shared objectives, and facilitate discussions to arrive at agreement. When they are professionally written and involve multiple partners, MOUs can be powerful tools that memorialize agreements and illuminate a path forward for generations of *Employment First* advocates to come.



Executive Orders

Similar to the approach of facilitating MOUs, your Council may also be in an outstanding position to request or negotiate executive orders that advance *Employment First* goals. This could be as general as declaring your state an “*Employment First* state,” or as specific as designating your state as a model public employer when it comes to hiring people with disabilities. You can use your relationships with the Governor’s Office to inquire about the feasibility of an executive order and what steps it would take to accomplish it. You may also be able to leverage the connections of your other *Employment First* partners to assist with your request.

Storytelling

One of the most critical elements of advancing the *Employment First* movement is collecting and sharing stories about people and their pathways to and through employment. One of the most effective ways to tell stories is through videos and social media. Video stories can share many complex ideas and emotions in a matter of minutes, usually more effectively than most other media. Storytelling is certainly something that *Employment First* partners can do independently, but this strategy can be so much more impactful if partners work together to identify, create, and share stories throughout their networks. It is also possible for partners to pool resources together (time, talent, and treasure) to create effective stories. Some Councils may have the resources to take the lead on creating stories with other partners, while other Councils may be better positioned to serve in a support role. Whatever the case may be, your Council has the potential to help amplify the stories of people who are benefiting from the *Employment First* movement.



Convening Groups

One of the classic roles of Councils is bringing people together to address issues. This is certainly the case in the *Employment First* movement. You should think about how your Council can bring together *Employment First* partners in a variety of ways. In some states, the Council plays a leading role in *Employment First* task forces, coalitions, workgroups, and committees. In other cases, Councils play a role in organizing town halls, community

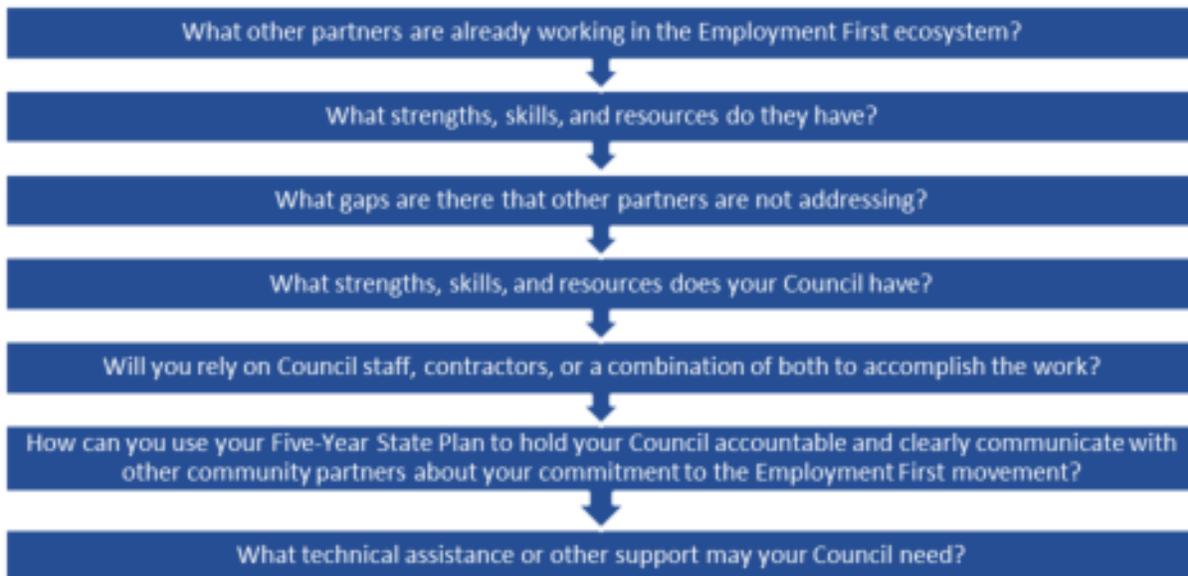


conversations, panel discussions, and other forums that bring people together to discuss critical issues affecting the *Employment First* movement. Whichever approach you take, do not underestimate the power of your Council in creating a sense of community, communication, and camaraderie.

Establishing or Strengthening Your Council’s Unique Role

Once you have identified the key *Employment First* partners in your state and considered the numerous ways your Council may want to work with them, it is time to establish or strengthen your Council’s unique role within your *Employment First* ecosystem. Just as it is important to play an assertive role in the movement, it is equally important to understand that your role may change over time. At minimum, you can reassess your role during the creation of each Five-Year State Plan, and ideally you will be evaluating it annually. As you think about the employment-related objectives your Councils wants to accomplish, Figure 2 recommends some questions that may be helpful to consider.

Figure 2. Next Steps for Building Effective *Employment First* Partnerships – Key Considerations



Key Takeaways

- Employment First is fundamentally part of each Council mission.
- Councils are part of an Employment First ecosystem; make sure you are not operating in a silo!
- There are many great Employment First partners to work with, and do not forget about those who oppose or are skeptical of your work; they will inevitably affect your work, so it is better to have a working relationship with them.
- Do not underestimate the power of your Council to bring people together to solve problems! There are countless ways to do this, and it is important to find the ways that work best for your unique Council.
- Find ways to hold your Council accountable and communicate clearly with others about your role in the Employment First movement.

