



# Summit Report

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October 7, 2011

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## Introduction

Employment First is a declaration of both philosophy and policy stating that: Employment is the first and preferred outcome of people with disabilities. This includes people with complex and significant disabilities, for whom working in the past has been limited, or has not traditionally occurred. According to Griffin-Hammis Associates, a leading Employment First advocate, employment should include these essential elements:

- Being the first and preferred outcome for working-age youth and adults with disabilities, including those with complex and significant disabilities, for whom working in the past has been limited, or has not traditionally occurred;
- Using typical or customized employment techniques to secure membership in the workforce, where employees with disabilities are included on the payroll of a competitive business or industry or are self-employed business owners;
- Where the assigned work tasks offer at least minimum or prevailing wages and benefits;
- And where typical opportunities exist for integration and interactions with co-workers without disabilities, with customers, and/or the general public (Griffin-Hammis Associates, Inc.).

Several states have moved forward to implement policies that focus on integrated, community-based employment; earning at or above the minimum wage as the first option for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Currently a number of states, many led by their Developmental Disability Councils (<http://www.nacdd.org/>) and/or their APSE Chapters (<http://www.apse.org/>), are exploring Employment First policies and practices.

*September 2010 National Disability Employment Statistics Released...*

*The percentage of people with disabilities in the labor force was 21.6. By comparison, the percentage of persons with no disability in the labor force was 69.9.*

*The unemployment rate for those with disabilities was 14.8 percent, compared with 9.0 percent for persons with no disability, not seasonally adjusted.*

(Office of Disability Employment Policy)

Some of these states include California, Washington, Minnesota, Indiana, North Carolina, Iowa, Rhode Island, Nevada, et al (Griffin-Hammis Associates, Inc.).

The North Dakota (ND) Employment First Summit came about from discussions of the Employment First Task Force. The Taskforce currently includes Tom Alexander, Amy Armstrong and Mary Mercer – North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD); Don Brunette – Friendship, Inc.; Scott Burlingame- Independence, Inc. Center for Independent Living; Vickay Gross and Teresa Larsen, ND Protection and Advocacy, and Joyce Smith - The Arc, Bismarck. The Taskforce met over the course of a year discussing the employment first philosophy, the national movement toward employment first, the possibility of a summit and ultimately the planning of ND’s first summit. In various capacities, the taskforce members had participated in state and national conferences, trainings, and discussions focused on the Employment First philosophy. This information and knowledge helped to formulate the taskforce and its direction.

Based on the experiences of other states and through our discussions, the taskforce members felt it was the right time to organize an Employment First Summit in ND. There were several key areas both nationally and in state that helped to solidify the need for an Employment First discussion including:

- Unacceptable community employment participation rate by people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities;
- Shrinking public funding for services and supports and a stronger need for economic stability for people with disabilities;
- Public policy reforms;
- Changing attitudes about disability and employment;
- Emerging technologies;
- Nationally, the slow growth of Supported Employment and Customized Employment practices;
- The lack of people with disabilities’ awareness of all of their options of employment; and



- A lack of accurate data regarding employment of people with disabilities depicting the number of people with disabilities who are employed in community employment.

As the summit was planned, the ND Developmental Disabilities Network (NDDDN) was asked to be a sponsor for the summit. The Network includes the ND State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD), the ND Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD), and the ND Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Project. The NDDDN and additional partners and taskforce member organizations ultimately collaborated to host and sponsor the Summit.

## Summit Overview

On Friday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010, North Dakota convened its first ever North Dakota Employment First Summit in Bismarck, ND. The goal of the ND Employment First Summit was to create a continuous dialogue regarding ways to increase and enhance employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The Summit served as a great starting point to discuss North Dakota's strengths and potential action steps needed to arrive at fully inclusive community employment for people with disabilities.

The summit was attended by over sixty individuals representing self-advocates, family members, advocacy organizations, state agencies, disability service providers, personal care attendants and transitions teachers. The invitation list was chosen to represent a wide range of backgrounds of ND's disability population and include those who had expressed an interest in the Employment First philosophy. Approximately half of the over one-hundred invitees were in attendance for the daylong session.

The summit agenda was developed to inform participants of current trends and employment data and include all participants in discussions. The day started with a brief overview of the day's activities

*According to US census data, of North Dakota's estimated 642,000 residents, 97,817 individuals age 5 and over have a disability. An Estimated 1 in 6 North Dakotans has a disability.*

(ND Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2009)

presented by guest facilitator, Bob Niemiec, Senior Consultant with Griffin-Hammis Associates and director of the Minnesota Employment Services and Technical Assistance Support Center. Niemiec provided insight into building an Employment First coalition and his experience working with Minnesota as well as other states' Employment First efforts. In addition, Amy Armstrong, NDCPD Employment First Task Force member, presented data on current employment trends for people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities. The day also included the featured presentation, "Let me tell you about my journey..." by Carlotta McCleary, family advocate, who spoke about her family's journey securing employment for their son; Janelle Olson, advocate, told the audience about employment challenges she faced and overcame. During the morning, the summit attendees participated in facilitated table discussions to provide input regarding "What is working in ND for employment of people with disabilities?" In the afternoon session, the participants were grouped again for facilitated table discussions with the new question "What will it take to increase employment participation of North Dakotans with disabilities in the workforce?"

## **What Was Learned**

Through table discussions and question and answer periods, information was gathered regarding what is currently working and what needs to be done in the future to change the landscape of the employment picture for people with disabilities.

### **What is working in ND for employment of people with disabilities?**

In the morning, participants were divided into six "affinity groups" made up of individuals representing similar groups including: advocacy agencies, disability service providers, self-advocates, family members, transition teachers, personal care attendants, and state agency representatives. Table discussion facilitators were responsible for leading the discussion of "What is working in ND for employment of people with disabilities?" recording responses and collecting all of the data. After the groups had time to discuss each question, a spokesperson from each table shared ideas with all Summit participants. The following are some of the areas each affinity group noted where things were working for employment of people with disabilities in ND.

**Advocacy Agency Participants** noted the Workers with Disabilities Coverage/Medicaid Buy In, public awareness efforts, and access to benefits planning through the Community Work Incentive Coordinators as some of the things that are working in ND.

**Disability Service Provider Participants** also noted the Workers with Disabilities Coverage/Medicaid Buy In; access to benefits planning through the Community Work Incentive Coordinators; the introduction of Employment First discussions and philosophy; ND's good economy has increased job possibilities in some parts of the state; the transition of students with disabilities from high school has begun to focus more on employment; and providers continue to build strong relationships with employers.

**Self-Advocates and Personal Care Attendants Participants** noted that public awareness efforts to help dispel myths seem to be more prevalent; accessibility of public places and removal of physical barriers has improved; people are advocating for employment choices and speaking out; formal and informal job supports are effective; and some are experiencing more job choices.

**Family Member Participants** also noted that public awareness efforts seem to be more prevalent to help dispel myths, the introduction of Employment First philosophy, there are many resources and supports available both formal and informal, there are strong employer relationships due to successful employment, and transition of students with disabilities from high school has begun to focus more on employment.

#### **State Agency Representatives & Transition**

**Teacher Participants** noted that access to benefits planning (Community Work Incentive Coordinators) has been very successful and important; as well as a healthy ND economy and strong collaborations with provider agencies and employers.

*Median earnings of people with disabilities, who worked full-time/full-year, trailed earnings of individuals without disabilities by approximately \$5,600.*

*In 2007, the poverty rate of working age people with disabilities in ND was 21.9 percent as compared to the poverty rate of 8.6 percent of working age people in ND without disabilities.*

(Erickson & Lee, 2007 Disability Status Report: North Dakota., 2008)

## **What will it take to increase the participation of North Dakotans with disabilities in the workforce?**

The afternoon session was a continuation of facilitated table discussions, however, the participants were separated into different groups, this time, each group consisted of a cross representation of each “affinity group.” During this set of table discussions each table was asked the following question, “What will it take to increase the participation of North Dakotans with disabilities in the work force?” Once again table facilitators were responsible for leading the discussion, recording responses and collecting all of the written responses from participants. Each group shared ideas from their table discussion. The following are some ideas and thoughts generated from the table discussion including strategies and possible solutions for increasing participation of North Dakotans with disabilities in the workforce. The following ideas and comments from participants are not listed in any specific order.

- Change the eligible age group for Workers with Disabilities Coverage (Medicaid) which is currently ages 16 through 65; change the eligibility to ages 16 through full retirement age to address the gap for seniors who are not yet eligible for full retirement.
- Make assistive technology more readily available and ensure there is training available for ways to use it and how to use the newest technology.
- Continue collaborations among local agencies, state agencies, and employers to work to develop successful community employment.
- Continue education and awareness to employers, the general public, legislators, schools, family members and others regarding people with disAbilities’ success and ability in the work place; dispelling myths and low expectations for employment.
- Increase access to benefits planners (Community Work Incentive Coordinators) to help youth and adults with disabilities working or considering work to better understand Social Security Work Incentives.
- Help employers understand that reasonable accommodations do not have to be expensive or complicated.
- Educate and create a focus on “Employment First.” End the status quo for people to get on Social Security benefits and sit stagnate in the system. Not working would not be an option that is assumed.
- Encourage more self-employment, and self-employment with supports, especially in rural ND for people with disabilities.

- Summer employment programs and job shadowing opportunities are important for youth.
- Consider state dollars for transportation services to include payment to service providers for time spent behind the wheel to provide service in rural communities, this would include direct support professional and qualified service providers.
- Employment training and soft skills training for people with disabilities are important and should start early to encourage youth to work.
- Transition meetings at schools should be focusing on employment goals and independent living not on what type of disability benefits the person can utilize without working. Begin young with employment; parents, teachers and providers should not assume having a disability means “benefits” versus earning a living.
- Schools, providers, state agencies, students and parents need to partner during the transition process making employment a priority; supporting after school and weekend employment with supports that are needed for youth.
- Promote self-determination, person-centered planning and choice of employment goals for people with disabilities. Offer more employment options and help develop career choices.
- Teamwork among state and local agencies, schools, and employers, to help reduce barriers to employment and create awareness of benefits planning, is a key to success. Collaboration is vital. Establishing an “Employment Community of Practice” might be a vehicle for this.
- Continue to work to remove barriers to employment, both physical and attitudinal barriers.
- Enhance training opportunities and professionalism for job coaches, employment specialists and other direct support staff.
- Increase the number of direct support professionals working so the ratio of staff to people with disabilities is such that inclusive individualized services can be provided. Consider reimbursement for providers at a rate that incentivizes individual supports for community-based inclusive employment.
- Consider changes to the reimbursement system for community employment service providers to provide more flexibility,

*It has been twenty years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, yet on a daily basis; people with disabilities have to overcome barriers to employment.*

*(Author Unknown)*

incentive for outcomes, and inclusion of mileage costs.

- Include adults and students with disabilities in community job fairs, inclusive job fairs for people of all abilities.
- Consider a community business mentoring another business regarding inclusive employment practices for people with disabilities and the use of tax incentives and accommodations.
- North Dakota should consider state sponsored tax incentives for hiring people with disabilities into community integrated employment settings.
- Establish more integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities within state government.
- Build employment information and supports into the ND Aging and Disability Resource Links (ADRLs).
- Consider ways Medicaid can be used to support employment (Rehab Option) under the state Medicaid plan.
- Consider that increased earnings (minimum wage or higher) equals increased job satisfaction, increased economic independence, and community inclusion for people with disabilities.
- Move away from sheltered/subminimum wage employment and build a system that supports integrated employment. Make sure people with disabilities know that center based employment is not their only option.

In addition, the following are some of the positive trends, unanticipated information, and innovative ideas shared during the table discussions and throughout the day long Summit.

### ***Positive Trends***

- Many participants were supportive of the work of Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Many participants were very supportive the need for benefits planners (Community Work Incentive Coordinators).
- Ending sub-minimum wage employment was a topic discussed; the Summit opened the door to further discussion on this issue.

- Self-advocates are aware of their human rights; they want to know their range of employment options and are aiming higher.
- There was a common feeling that education increases acceptance and decreases disability stigma.
- Time and effort toward relationship building pays off and aids in building awareness with employers and agencies.
- ND has a strong work ethic; it's not an option to not work.
- Collaboration all around is the key to success.

### ***Unanticipated Information***

- There was considerable discussion about educating businesses about hiring people with disabilities; considering this has been tried for many years yet it seems there has not been effective return on investment.
- Transportation is always an issue but there were few suggestions for ideas of ways to improve the transportation situation.
- Rural/urban breakdown is a barrier that often does not get enough attention. It is expected to be a bigger issue as work is done with rural schools to support community employment.
- Employment fairs for youth is a very positive thing, yet, it is very important to also integrate students with disabilities in other career fairs, not just to create a segregated events.
- Providing accommodations should be viewed as no big deal as one moves to more integrated settings of employment.

### ***Innovative Ideas***

- ND needs to work at the transition level on talking about employment options, not benefit options.

*“Change is an essential component to doing business differently, including responding to the expectation of persons with disabilities that they will work.”*

(Kiernan, Hoff, Freeze, & Mank, 2011)

- The issue of appropriate payment rates and real wages for support staff is seen as part of the real answers for improving employment outcomes.
- A trend towards awareness by people with disabilities, and importance of encouraging people with disabilities to expect to be employed.
- The trend of encouraging employment in young people, including educating teachers and other school officials about the importance of work.
- More attention should be given to people with traumatic brain injuries and mental illness who may be falling through the cracks.
- The need to raise wages for people with disabilities.
- Showcase successes, build on strengths and dispel myths through education and public awareness about the "abilities" of individuals with disabilities; show that diverse employment options are possible for all.
- In schools - educate about work incentives, grow work experience opportunities for students.

## **Next Steps**

As the Employment First Taskforce considered the Summit discussion and state and national Employment First thoughts, the following next steps were identified. It is important for ND to develop a unified vision and support the outcome to move forward with Employment First for North Dakotans. Additional ND Employment First summits will be a priority, to include broadening the participation of self-advocates and families. The Employment First Taskforce and other partners will work to plan and implement future summits. It was also identified that education of all North Dakotans about the Employment First philosophy is a key goal for this initiative. In addition, there is a need to be aware of and responsive to both national and state policy changes that affect Employment First and advocate for people with disabilities on these various issues. ND should also consider Employment First legislation and public policy that will support competitive wage, community, integrated employment as being the first and preferred outcome for working-age youth and adults with disabilities, including those with complex and significant disabilities.



Employment First is not a concept that is owned by any single group, community, or organization. It is sound public policy and practice. It reflects what persons with disabilities are seeking and is the intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Olmstead decision. It is the right thing to do. The presumption of employability is the base upon which Employment First is built; and the end result is increased economic independence for persons with disabilities... the goal is full inclusion and the acknowledgement that the labor force participation rates for persons with and without disabilities should be the same. (Kiernan, Hoff, Freeze, & Mank, 2011)

### **Summit Budget Overview**

The ND Developmental Disabilities Network (NDDDN), which includes the ND State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD), the ND Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD), and the ND Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Project, along with Friendship, Inc. of Fargo, ND; sponsored the ND Employment First Summit. Each organization gave money to be put toward the Summit. A fund was established at NDCPD, who serves as the fiscal agent for the Employment First Initiative budget. In addition to the monetary sponsors for the initiative, all of the task force members contributed their time and talents to the preparation and initiation of the Summit and the development of this report. Also, the time commitment of the guest speakers and all of the summit participants was vital to the success of the event and the initiative. The Summit was a success due to the collaborative nature of the taskforce and participants and all of the in-kind as well as monetary resources donated.



## References

Erickson, W., & Lee, C. (2008). *2007 Disability Status Report: North Dakota*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics.

Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2010). *Disability Statistics from the 2008 American Community Survey*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics.

Griffin-Hammis Associates, Inc. (n.d.). *About Employment First*. Retrieved September 9, 2011, from E1: [www.employmentfirst.net](http://www.employmentfirst.net)

Kiernan, W., Hoff, D., Freeze, S., & Mank, D. (2011). Perspectives, Employment First: a Beginning Not an End. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* , 300-304.

ND Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. (2009). *North Dakota State Rehabilitation Council - Annual Report to the Governor*. Bismarck, ND: ND Department of Human Services.

Office of Disability Employment Policy. (n.d.). Retrieved October 8, 2010, from Office of Disability Employment Policy: <http://www.dol.gov/odep>



**Appendix A**  
**Summit Invitation**





NDCPD at MSU  
 500 University Ave. West  
 Minot, ND 58707  
 1.800.233.1737

THIS EVENT IS A PARTNERSHIP OF:  
 THE NORTH DAKOTA DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES NETWORK • NORTH DAKOTA MEDICAID INFRASTRUCTURE GRANT • FREEDOM RESOURCE CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING • FRIENDSHIP, INC. • NORTH DAKOTA APSE CHAPTER • & THE NORTH DAKOTA EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE



September 7, 2010

Dear,

On behalf of the North Dakota Employment First Task Force, we are pleased to invite you to the first **North Dakota Employment First Summit** to be held on Friday, October 15<sup>th</sup> from 9am –3pm at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel located at 800 S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Bismarck, ND with registration beginning at 8:30am. A continental breakfast and lunch will be provided. You have been invited to participate because of your strong support of community based, inclusive employment for people with disabilities.

*Employment First* is the vision of making employment the first priority for people with disabilities. Just like other members of society, people with disabilities should have the opportunity to earn a living wage, in a job of their choosing that uses their talents and skills. Employment First means expecting, encouraging, providing, creating, and rewarding inclusive employment in the workforce.

The Summit is a collaborative partnership with support from the ND Developmental Disabilities Network including North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities, Protection & Advocacy Project, and the State Council on Developmental Disabilities along with additional support from task force member organizations. The Summit will be an exciting day filled with presentations and discussions to gather input regarding ways North Dakota can build a system that supports the Employment First vision.

Employment is working at a job in a community business at regular wages or owning one's own business. We believe that by establishing an Employment First Initiative in North Dakota and hosting a summit, all state citizens with disabilities will have optimal advantages to gainful employment and financial stability.

~ Over for more information ~

*Summit attendance is by invitation only. For anyone needing to travel the night before, a block of rooms is available at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel under the “NDCPD-Minot State University” room block until Monday, October 4th, 2010. Please contact the Ramkota at 701.258.7700 to make your reservation.*

**Stipends are available for people with disabilities and family members to cover travel, lodging, and food costs.**

**Please register to attend the *Summit* by contacting Nicole at 800.233.1737 or email: [nicole.lavallie@minotstateu.edu](mailto:nicole.lavallie@minotstateu.edu) by Monday, October 4th, 2010.**

At that time, please let us know of any accommodations you may need or if you would like to request a stipend.

We are looking forward to seeing you October 15<sup>th</sup>! Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

Thank you,

***North Dakota Employment First Task Force Members***

- Tom Alexander, Amy Armstrong, Thalia Esser & Mary Mercer - NDCPD •
  - Don Brunette - Friendship Inc. • Scott Burlingame - Freedom CIL •
  - Vickay Gross & Teresa Larsen, P&A •



**Appendix B**  
**Summit Agenda**





North Dakota Employment First Summit  
 Friday, October 15th, 2010  
 Best Western Ramkota Hotel - Bismarck, ND

NDCPD at MSU  
 500 University Ave. West  
 Minot, ND 58707  
 1.800.233.1737

THIS EVENT IS A PARTNERSHIP OF:  
 THE NORTH DAKOTA DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES NETWORK • NORTH DAKOTA MEDICAID INFRASTRUCTURE GRANT • FREEDOM RESOURCE CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING • FRIENDSHIP, INC. • NORTH DAKOTA APSE CHAPTER • & THE NORTH DAKOTA EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE



**Agenda**

- 8:30 am** Registration and Continental Breakfast (provided)
- 9:00 am** Welcome and Overview of Day's Activities  
 Amy Armstrong, ND Center for Persons with Disabilities  
 Bob Niemiec, Griffin Hammis Assoc.
- 9:20 am** "Let Me Tell You About My Journey..."  
 Carlotta Mc Cleary, Federation of Families, Parent & Advocate  
 Janelle Olson, Self Advocate
- 10:00 am** BREAK
- 10:25 am** Current Employment Picture for People with Disabilities  
 Bob Niemiec, Griffin Hammis Assoc.  
 ND Employment First Summit Task Force Member
- 10:45 am** What's Working in ND for Employment for People with Disabilities?  
 Facilitated Table Discussion
- 12:00 noon** LUNCH (provided)
- 1:00 pm** What Will it Take to Increase Employment Participation of North Dakotans with Disabilities?  
 Facilitated Table Discussion
- 2:00 pm** BREAK
- 2:15 pm** Summary of Table Discussions  
 Bob Niemiec, Griffin Hammis Assoc.
- 2:45 pm** Action Steps, Next Steps and Closing Comments  
 Bob Niemiec, Griffin Hammis Assoc.  
 ND Employment First Task Force Members
- 3:00 pm** Adjourn



## **Appendix C**

### **Employment First Internet Resources**



## **Employment First Internet Resources**

[Establishing a National Employment First Agenda](#)

[www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)

[Employment First! Making Integrated Employment the Preferred ...](#)

[www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article\\_id=202](http://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article_id=202)

[Employment 1st](#)

[employment1st.org](http://employment1st.org)

[Employment First: Full Throttle Ahead!](#)

[employment1st.blogspot.com](http://employment1st.blogspot.com)

[Employment First](#)

[www.employmentfirst.net](http://www.employmentfirst.net)

[Employment First | Facebook](#)

[www.facebook.com/pages/Employment-First/165902730134710](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Employment-First/165902730134710)

[Minnesota APSE » Employment First](#)

[www.mnapse.org/employment-first/](http://www.mnapse.org/employment-first/)

[Employment First | Training Resource Network, Inc.](#)

<https://trn-store.com/employment-first>

[Kansas Employment 1st – Making jobs the first option for Kansans with disabilities](#)

<http://employment1st.org>

