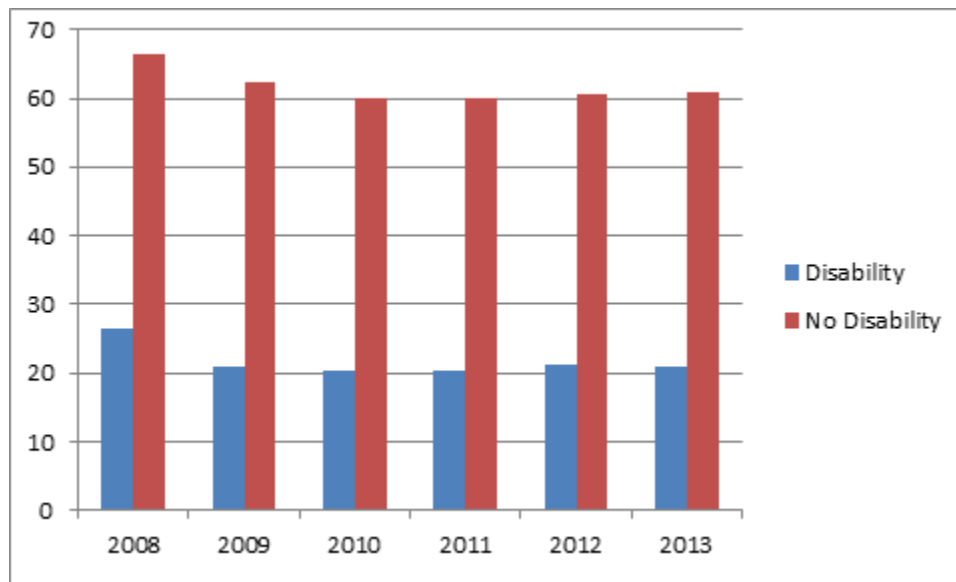


## Executive Summary

Although employment is one of the primary building blocks leading to inclusion, better income, good health and freedom, it remains an elusive goal for many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who wish to work. Equal access to employment for people with disabilities has not improved since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) almost 25 years ago. The Current Population Survey shows an overall decline in employment among people with disabilities in both the United States and Arizona since 1994. Further, the disparity in national and state employment rates between those with no disabilities and those with disabilities remains large and has grown significantly since the ADA's passage. According to the American Community Survey, in 2013 the Arizona gap has remained relatively constant over the last five years with approximately 21 percent of workers with disabilities employed - 40 percentage points less than the 61 percent of workers without disabilities employed.

**The employment gap: The percentage of Arizonans ages 21-64 employed with or without a disability, 2008-2013**



In light of this disheartening reality, there exists a growing national movement that is trying to affect change in the disability community in important fundamental ways. Most crucial in this effort, is changing the expectations many people have about the capacity of individuals with disabilities to meaningfully contribute in the workforce and the community. Employment First is a national initiative that addresses this concern. Employment First promotes competitive employment in an integrated setting at minimum wage or higher, as this is the preferred outcome for people with disabilities. Arizona would like to champion this initiative by implementing its common vision in this state. Arizona seeks to change and enhance expectations around employment to promote progressive change in the support infrastructure, which will enable people with disabilities to pursue employment opportunities and achieve economic independence.

In October, 2013, stakeholders convened to facilitate an Employment First discussion. During that meeting, a report was commissioned, which provided an overview of Employment First initiatives and highlighted lessons learned from existing Employment First states. During the meeting, an agreement

was made to move forward with development of an Arizona Employment First strategy. In January, 2014, an Employment First Core Team comprised of advocates, family members, service providers, educators, state agencies, and the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, was created to help guide the planning process. As such, monthly meetings were held; a communication plan was developed; an informational webinar was presented; and six community forums were conducted to gather information from additional stakeholders.

In total, 295 stakeholders participated in the community forums, which were held in July and August of 2014. The stakeholders were tasked with providing ideas and recommendations on how to advance Employment First in Arizona; identifying opportunities that currently exist in the state; and offering suggestions on who could help implement Employment First and how. The major themes identified were:

- Messaging through communications and policy
- Ensuring accurate data collection and performance measurement
- Supporting education in schools to set transition and employment foundations
- Involving full participation from self-advocates, family members, educators, employers, service providers and state agencies
- Providing adequate funding
- Encouraging continued stakeholder involvement in all phases
- Sharing success stories

The community forums generated a wealth of ideas, recommendations, and suggestions to help move Employment First forward. Input has been archived and is available for review. In addition, a list of participants, organizations represented, and details of the planning process are contained in the *Arizona Employment First Community Forum Findings*.

The input collected from stakeholders will be used to assist with development of a comprehensive and realistic strategic plan. It confirms the need for:

- Broad stakeholder representation throughout the process
- Engaging the impacted community
- Focusing efforts on integrated & competitive employment outcomes
- Revising state agency policy and practice
- Aligning funding to promote employment services and supports
- Supporting transition from school to employment through collaboration within schools and within communities
- Agreeing to performance measures and data management

The need to establish Employment First policies is a priority. Only 21 percent of individuals with disabilities are employed. Too many individuals with disabilities are not working or not considering work, and are unsure of what the future holds for them.