

**Arizona Employment First**

**Community Forum Findings**



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# 1. Overview

## Purpose

This report summarizes the six Employment First community forums that took place in July and August 2014

## Key Themes and Recommendations

A summary of the main themes and recommendations gathered during the Community Forums are included in the Key Findings section of this report. These themes are based upon the comments shared by stakeholders who participated in the forums. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, they are not intended to be the exact language from any one participant.

## 2. Background

Arizona's Employment First efforts were initiated in 2011 when a diverse group of stakeholders submitted an Arizona proposal for a federal Project of National Significance (PNS) Grant. Although the PNS Grant was not awarded, a core group of dedicated individuals remained committed in furthering positive policies around employment for youth and young adults with developmental disabilities.

In October 2013 the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council convened a group of stakeholders to initiate an Employment First discussion. ***Employment First: A Review of Successful State Strategies for Improving Employment Outcomes among People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities***, prepared by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS), provided an overview of Employment First Initiatives and highlighted lessons learned from existing Employment First states. The Report served as the basis to begin discussion among the stakeholders on how to improve integrated and competitive employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

The stakeholders agreed to move forward with development of an Employment First strategy and recommended a Core Team be established to help guide the planning process.

Core Team members were identified and began meeting in January 2014 to map out the planning process. The desired product of the planning process is the development of a statewide strategic plan to help guide the development of policies and practices that promote employment in typical work settings and enhance individual self-sufficiency and community inclusion.

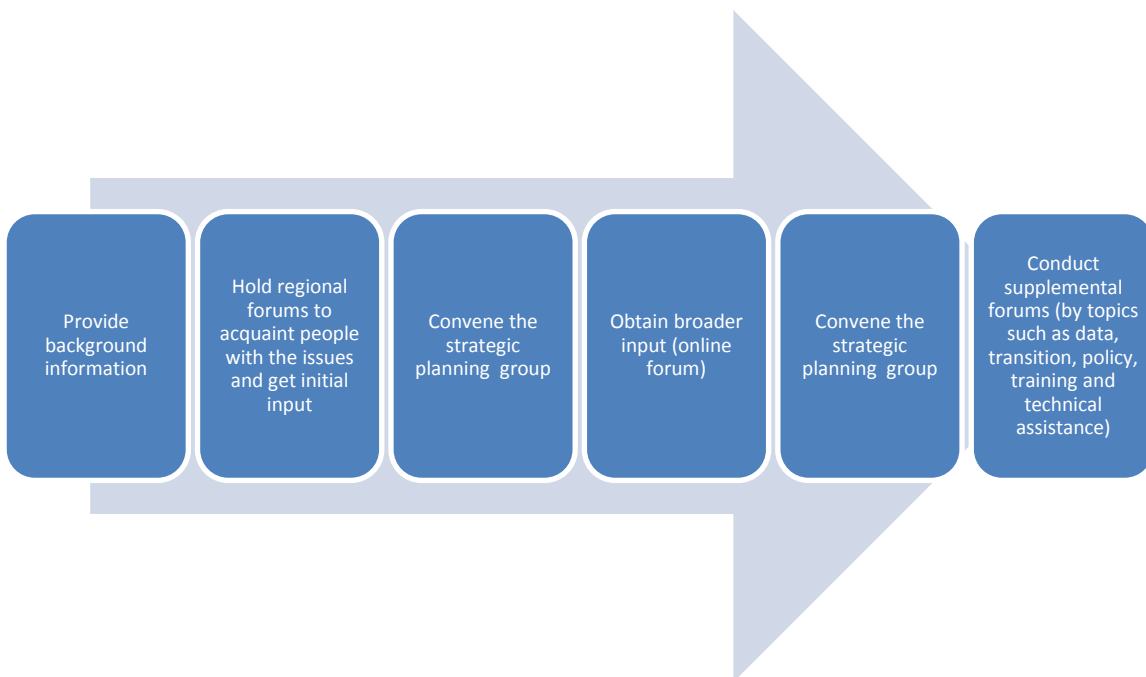
Core Team members agreed to the key elements of a successful planning process. Including:

- The process is inclusive of persons with disabilities, family members, employers, service providers, advocacy groups, funders, policy makers, educators, state agencies, and the state's University Centers on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.
- The right people are involved at the right time in order to have the wisdom and buy-in needed for successful planning and implementation.
- The plan is developed with the diverse perspectives of the various audiences; there is cross-stakeholder involvement.
- Clear definitions are agreed to.

## Background, cont.

- There is a clear and measurable description of success, including benchmarks and a process for monitoring implementation.
- The plan is simple to understand.
- The plan is strategic and builds on existing assets and resources.
- The plan represents the whole state.
- The plan is feasible to implement.
- There are examples of effective policies and practices provided as a companion to the plan.
- Required resources are identified .
- Data needed to monitor outcomes are identified; there is a realistic plan to generate and/or access the desired data; and data are shared among stakeholders.
- At the end of the planning process, stakeholders are in agreement on the desired results.

The Core Team proposed the following strategic planning process:



## Background cont.

### Step One: Provide Background Information

The Core Team recommended developing short, concise, audience-specific background briefs that put an “Arizona face” on Employment First, and a communication plan that would be followed throughout the planning process and into the implementation phase. The Core Team also recommended an informational webinar be held to increase awareness and support. Arizona Works: An Employment First Initiative Webinar was held on April 30, 2014. The Institute for Human Development (IHD) at Northern Arizona University (NAU) served as the host of the webinar. Representatives of the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN) along with members of the Strategic Planning Core Team, presented an overview of the concept of Employment First, federal initiatives supporting state policy development, examples of other states’ initiatives, and of existing Arizona endeavors that support the state beginning its own strategic planning.

### Step Two: Hold Regional Forums

The Core Group recommended a series of community forums to gather information to assist in the development of a comprehensive Arizona Employment First Strategic Plan.

Six community forums were held:

- Lake Havasu City – July 24, 2014
- Flagstaff – July 30, 2014
- Phoenix – August 5, 2014
- Sierra Vista – August 7, 2014
- Tucson – August 12, 2014
- Yuma – August 14, 2014

Invitations were disseminated to individuals with disabilities, self-advocates, family members, educators and school transition specialists, service providers, state agency representatives, community leaders, employers, and all interested parties to join the discussion about employment for people with disabilities.

Each community forum was held from 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m., and provided background on national and state initiatives with the majority of the meeting time devoted to the generation of input from the attendees on the following three topics:

- What can we do in Arizona to advance Employment First?
- What opportunities currently exist?
- Who can help and how?

## Background, cont.

A logo was created to help brand and market the forums. The logo, JOBS (Job Opportunities Build Success), incorporates the colors of the Arizona state flag to represent the broad array of stakeholders committed to Arizona's Employment First efforts.

### Step Three: Convene the Strategic Planning Group

The Core Team is currently beginning Step Three of the overall planning process. Using the input from the participants who attended the community forums, the Team will begin the process of drafting a formal Employment First Strategic Plan. All of the input collected during the community forums has been cataloged and a summary of the prevailing views of the audiences is provided in the next section of this report.

### 3. Community Forums Summary

The purpose of this section is to present findings from six community/regional forums. This work is intended to assist Arizona's efforts, not only in development of a comprehensive strategic plan, but also to translate the plan into practice and operations at all levels of the service system.

The strengths in Arizona's existing system provide a solid base on which to develop and implement an Employment First statewide initiative. The task at hand is to connect existing initiatives, work towards capacity building, capitalize on innovation, and realign services and supports to focus on the overarching goal of greater opportunities for employment and self-sufficiency for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Arizona.

In summary:

- 295 people participated in in-person town hall style forums in six cities.
- 159 organizations were represented.
- 720 comments, ideas, recommendations, and all suggestions were collected.
- Participation by community:
  - Lake Havasu City – July 24, 2014; 17 participants
  - Flagstaff – July 30, 2014; 32 participants
  - Phoenix – August 5, 2014; 78 participants
  - Sierra Vista – August 7, 2014; 22 participants
  - Tucson – August 12, 2014; 118 participants
  - Yuma – August 14, 2014; 28 participants



## Community Forums Summary, cont.

### Question One: ***What Can We Do in Arizona to Advance Employment First?***

Major themes identified: Messaging through communications and policy, data and performance measurement.

- Begin the discussion about employment as early as possible; establish the expectation that employment is every student's preferred outcome when they graduate. Communicate the message of early intervention, set expectations and start early with the idea of employment.
- Provide education on the value of employment to individuals and families.
- Provide a liaison between businesses, families, and educators.
- Improve transition between school and adult services; make it as seamless as possible.
- Identify business needs and employment trends and provide training to meet needs.
- Educate employers on the benefits of hiring: financial incentives; technical assistance; accommodations; a productive and valued employee for their business.
- Require VR referrals, employment assessments and work experiences prior to entering day training program.
- Provide opportunities to practice skills in integrated employment settings.

### Question Two: ***What Opportunities Currently Exist?***

Major themes identified: Focus on education, collaboration and training.

- Encourage the opportunity for schools and DD to work together on transition planning.
- Celebrate champion employers such as Safeway, McDonald's, and Target.
- Build on the AZ Community of Practice on Transition to increase local collaboration.
- Recognize and support the efforts of current employment service providers.
- Increase awareness of national service programs – AmeriCorps, volunteerism.
- Support effective programs such as: DB101; Ticket to Work and PASS; WIIN; Project SEARCH.
- Encourage and support more job coaching.
- Replicate successful Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs such as: EVIT; MetroTech; and similar programs.
- Expand and encourage internships, volunteering and paid work experience.

## Community Forums Summary, cont.

### Question Three: *Who Can Help and How?*

Major themes identified: Everyone needs to be involved; funding; continued stakeholder involvement in all phases; share success stories.

- Everyone can help. Everyone is a stakeholder.
- Provide adequate funding for employment services and ongoing supports.
- Recruit administrators, teachers, and families.
- Partner with local, state, and federal governments.
- Reach out to colleges and universities to design curriculum that teaches future instructors about the benefits of employment.
- Support work programs – including Ticket to Work and One Stop.
- Recruit individuals with disabilities who have been successful in their employment, telling their story, motivating others by showing it can happen.
- Recruit family members to talk to other family members about employment as a goal for their children.
- Develop comprehensive IEPs and practical transition plans for students.
- Recruit supportive employers to talk to other employers.
- Provide information to help “bust the myths” about the barriers to employment for individuals receiving state and federal benefits.
- State and local government should model employment first by hiring individuals with disabilities.

## 4. In Conclusion

The overarching goal of Arizona's Employment First planning is to ensure broad participation from stakeholders to develop and support a comprehensive strategic plan that can contribute to greater employment opportunities for Arizonans with disabilities. It is not intended to remove other services and supports that contribute to the well-being of Arizonans with disabilities, but rather to encourage employment as one of the primary considerations for those of working age.

Employment First is a vision for the future that can only be successful when there is a collaborative focus on the value of integrated and competitive employment for all individuals of working age, including those with disabilities. The concept must be accompanied by policy development, financing that supports the vision, training and technical assistance, mechanisms that allow for service innovation and the ability to measure progress toward the desired outcome. Collectively, these elements offer the supports people with disabilities can use to increase their self-sufficiency and become an integral part of their community.

The Employment First Core Team looks forward to additional outreach and opportunity for stakeholder involvement as it moves forward with drafting an Arizona Employment First Strategic Plan.