

Supported Employment

Promote competitive, integrated, and meaningful employment opportunities for Alaskans

Supported employment is founded on the belief that anyone can work if provided the right supports. Supported employment services help Alaskans with intellectual-developmental disabilities, behavioral health disorders, dementia, and traumatic brain injury, obtain and maintain employment in typical work settings, earning competitive wages and benefits, side-by-side with people who do not experience disabilities.

When Alaskans with disabilities are employed, they contribute positively in their communities, pay taxes, and experience meaningful engagement that reduces isolation and promotes health and well-being.

Sensible investment to grow a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities, means directing resources for grant programs, vocational rehabilitation, university programs, peer support and mentorship, and more.

Alaska Mental Health Trust (Trust) beneficiaries¹ benefit from practices, policies, and funding that promote supported employment. The Trust and its partner advisory boards promote evidence-based strategies and best practices that increase opportunities for beneficiaries to gain integrated, competitive, and meaningful employment in their communities.

Employing People with Disabilities

Employment for people with disabilities is associated with better health and lower public costs. A 2013 University of Kansas study

found that “participants with any level of paid employment had significantly lower rates of smoking and better quality of life; self-reported health status was significantly higher; and per person per month Medicaid expenditures were less.”²

American Community Survey data from 2017 reveals that only 40% of Alaskans with a disability are currently employed, compared to 80% of people without disabilities. For some beneficiary groups, the rate of employment is even lower. For example, only 26% of Alaskans with a cognitive disability are employed.³

Employment is an essential part of recovery for many individuals with behavioral health disorders, offering positive impacts on life satisfaction, self-esteem, and reducing symptoms. Two-thirds (66%) of people with serious mental illness indicate they want to work, but only 15% are employed.⁴

Additionally, employment is a way out of poverty and a way to prevent people from becoming homeless or entering the disability or criminal justice systems.

Supported Employment in Alaska

Alaska is an *Employment First* state. *Employment First* is a national movement to promote employment in the general workforce as the preferred option for people with disabilities receiving assistance from publicly-funded systems. Alaska state agencies work together to support disability resource coordinators at job centers, public school

transition services, vocational rehabilitation, and more. Following are some of these efforts:

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) within the state Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) helps Alaskans with disabilities prepare for and maintain employment. Vocational rehabilitation might include job counseling, referrals, training, placement services, and assistive technology.

The Division of Senior and Disabilities Services (SDS) provides individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), who are eligible for waiver long term waiver services, with opportunities for supported employment services. Within SDS, the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE) leads a collaborative employer engagement group called the *Business Employment Services Team* which supports employers in hiring people with disabilities.⁵

The Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) within the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) promotes competitive grant funds and the *Individual Placement and Support* (IPS) program, an evidence-based model that promotes customized and transitional employment services for people with serious mental illness and substance use disorders.

The Department of Revenue (DOR) administers the Alaska *Achieving a Better Life Experience* (ABLE) program that helps

Alaskans with disabilities save for qualified disability expenses without losing eligibility for certain public assistance programs.

Other statewide programs that offer supported employment resources, include the *Client Assistance Program, Alaska Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Program, Disability Determination Services, and Ticket to Work.*

What Needs to Happen?

- ✓ Initiate a statewide *Alaska Work Matters* or *Employment First* taskforce to further implement Alaska's 2014 *Employment First* law concepts of competitive and integrated employment for Alaskans with disabilities, including *State as A Model Employer* (SAME) efforts;
- ✓ Support continued funding and grant opportunities for supported employment activities and programs in Alaska;
- ✓ Provide training and technical assistance to service providers to implement practices that support employment for people with all kinds of disabilities, at all levels;
- ✓ Enhance apprenticeship opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities, including people with behavioral health disorders;
- ✓ Reduce barriers in state policy, procedure, and regulations related to employment for people with disabilities across the lifespan.

The Trust and partner advisory boards support competitive, integrated, and meaningful employment opportunities for Alaskans with intellectual-developmental disabilities, behavioral health disorders, dementia, and traumatic brain injury. ❖

¹ Alaska Mental Health Trust beneficiaries include Alaskans with mental illness, substance use disorders (SUD), Intellectual/Developmental Disorders (IDD) including fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (ADRD), and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

² Hall, J., Kurth, N., Hunt, S., *Employment as a Health determinant for Working-age, Dually-eligible People with Disabilities*, University of Kansas, 2013: <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/11286?show=full>

³ Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2019). 2017 Disability Status Report: Alaska. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability (YTI). http://www.disabilitystatistics.org/StatusReports/2017-PDF/2017-StatusReport_AK.pdf?CFID=21287273&CFTOKEN=1f758a616f571dc8-1AA49A94-0C14-2190-8A1E96E1F192CCA3

⁴ Individualized Placement Support (IPS) Employment Center <https://ipsworks.org/index.php/evidence-for-ips/>

⁵ For more resources on employment, visit the Council's Alaska Transition Handbook: Pathway to Adulthood and Employment. <http://dhss.alaska.gov/qcdse/Documents/TransitionsHandbook.pdf>

For more information, go to: www.alaskamentalhealthtrust.org/jointadvocacy