



Alaska Work Matters Task Force Final Report





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Executive Summary



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In early 2021, Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy initiated the formation of the Alaska Work Matters Task Force under the umbrella of the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE) and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Mental Health Trust). The directors of the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and the GCDSE were named as chair and co-chair, and 22 additional individuals representing state agencies and boards, Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation, Mental Health Trust beneficiaries, employers, and educators were selected to participate.

The purpose of the Task Force was to review and analyze existing policies, practices, and procedures, barriers, and workforce utilization data regarding the employment of people with disabilities in the State of Alaska, and prepare a report that includes recommendations that should be adopted by the Governor and applicable departments, agencies, and commissions of the executive branch, and policy options for consideration by the legislative branch to expand and improve employment opportunities and outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Twenty-two recommendations and sixty-eight action steps were identified by the Task Force and are described in detail in the full report.

The Governor may want to consider assigning responsibility to the Directors of DVR and GCDSE to establish an ad hoc working group including representatives from relevant beneficiary boards in order to coordinate activities and assess progress with respect to implementation of recommendations included in this report.

The Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Director Duane Mayes & the Alaska Department of Health, Governors Council on Disabilities & Special Education Executive Director Patrick Reinhart would like to thank Governor Dunleavy for his support of the Alaska Work Matters Task Force. The power and value of work must be our number one priority for all Alaskans to include people with disabilities. We believe the recommendations below will move us in that direction and further support the State of Alaska as a model employer and a employment first state for Alaskans with disabilities.



Recommendations in Section 1: State of Alaska as a Model Employer for Individuals with Disabilities

1. Set utilization goals for State hiring
2. Increase awareness and utilization of the existing Provisional Hire program
3. Establish a centralized accommodation fund for state positions
4. Increase state employment for people with the most significant disabilities through support for Personal Care Services
5. Ensure that all State of Alaska online platforms are fully accessible
6. Educate executive and legislative staff about disability employment trends and data on employment outcomes

Recommendations in Section 2: Building the Capacity of the Private Sector

1. Build on the existing Business Engagement Services (BEST) Teams to increase collaboration between private sector employers in order to increase diversity and inclusion
2. Continue planning and implementing job fairs (including virtual and reverse job fairs) to connect employers and job seekers with disabilities
3. Increase the number of students with disabilities served by the Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC)
4. Increase the number of people with disabilities involved in Apprenticeships and Internships
5. Support disability-owned and disabled veteran-owned businesses through procurement and contracting systems
6. Reduce hiring barriers for job seekers with justice system involvement

Recommendations in Section 3: Employment Services and Supports

1. Strengthen State support for Employment First.
2. Strengthen implementation of the state Medicaid plan and waivers to better support employment services and outcomes
3. Expand the use of the Individual Placement and Supports (IPS) model for people with mental health conditions or substance use disorders
4. Improve transportation policies to require options that are reliable and accessible for individuals with disabilities
5. Support rural traditional skill development such as subsistence and self-employment

Recommendations for Section 4: Preparing for Work and Transition

1. Expand and improve existing School-to-Work transition resources for school personnel
2. Strengthen the At-Risk Youth Initiative

Recommendations for Section 5: Stay at Work, Return to Work

1. Improve stay-at-work and return-to-work policies and programs for individuals who become ill or injured on the job
2. Support and encourage teleworking where possible and desirable
3. Invest in Post-COVID Health and Safety Planning
4. Support and expand the Senior Employment Initiative



INTRODUCTION

"Employment is the most direct and cost-effective means to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve independence and economic-self-sufficiency and revitalize our state's economy by growing the taxpayer base and simultaneously lowering costs to the state for cash or medical and disability benefits and their administration." ¹

In early 2021, Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy initiated the formation of the Alaska Work Matters Task Force under the umbrella of the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Mental Health Trust). In response, the Commissioners of the Departments of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD), Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) announced the establishment of a time limited Task Force to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for Alaskans with disabilities. The directors of the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (part of DOLWD) and the Governor's Council on Disabilities & Special Education (GCDSE) were named as chair and co-chair.

This report provides a summary of the Task Force formation, activities, and recommendations.

Alaska's leadership and challenges in employment for people with disabilities

The state of Alaska has a longstanding commitment to pursuing initiatives designed to expand and improve employment policies and services for people with disabilities. Through initiatives ranging from development of an active business/employer network (BEST) to participation in the U.S. Department of Labor's State Exchange on Employment & Disability (SEED), Alaska has long made a commitment to increasing and maintaining career opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

For example, in September 2012 then-Governor Sean Parnell issued an executive order creating a State as Model Employer Task Force within the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE). The Task Force was charged with reviewing best practices and developing strategies to create an inclusive work environment in state government and consisted of members from various state agencies including the Division of Personnel and Labor Relations, the ADA Coordinator's office, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR).²

In 2014 the Alaska legislature passed Employment First legislation directing all state agencies to focus on employment in the general workforce as the first and preferred outcome for all working-age Alaskans with disabilities and individuals receiving school to work transition services. In addition, Beneficiary Employment and Engagement was identified in 2014 as a focus area for the Mental Health Trust, and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD), Departments of Health (DOH), Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), and Education and Early Development (DEED) continue to provide an annual report to the Trust on progress in implementing Employment First. This was followed up in 2018 by the DOLWD's successful efforts to rescind a state regulation

¹ Letter supporting development of the Work Matters Task Force from Commissioner Ledbetter, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and Commissioner Crum, Department of Health and Social Services, February 2021

² National Governors Association Center for Best Practices White Paper September 2018: States Expand Employment and Training Opportunities for People with Disabilities



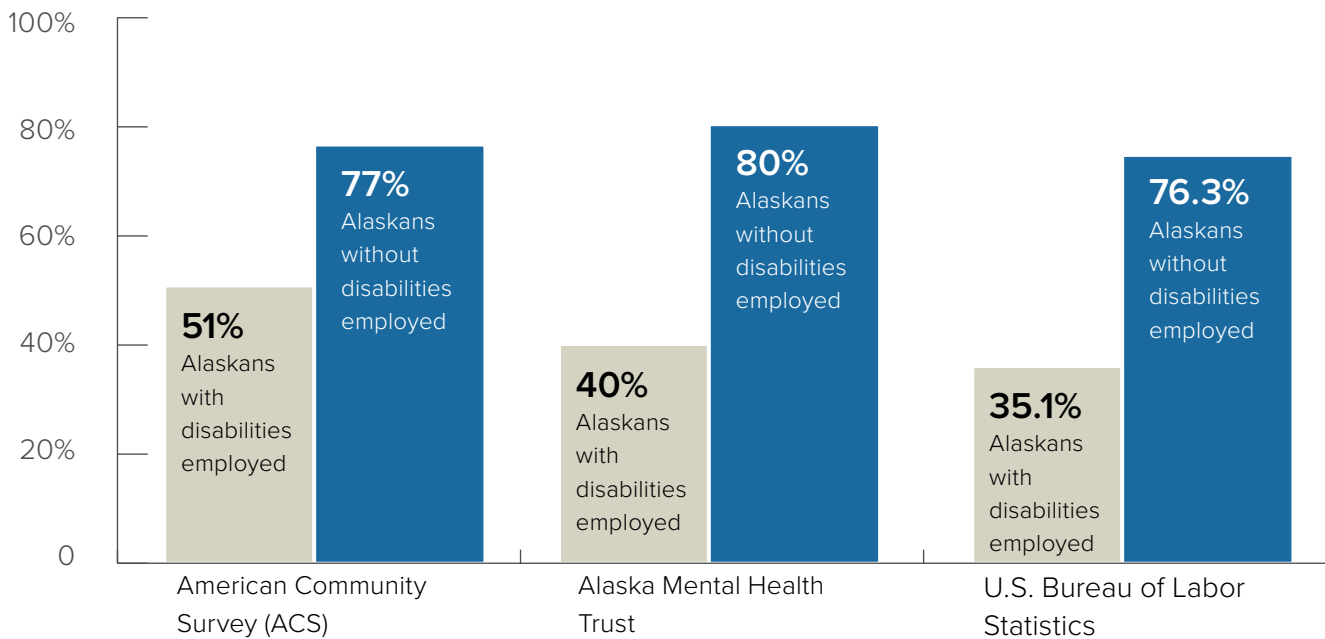


that authorized employers to pay a subminimum wage to specified individuals with disabilities under specified circumstances, becoming the third state in the nation to guarantee that all individuals with disabilities must be paid at least minimum wage for their work.

Alaska has a long-standing Provisional Hire Program that allows state agencies to hire a candidate with a disability without going through the competitive hiring process. DVR screens candidates to ensure a good match and assists with training and accommodation. More recently, the Alaska DOLWD strengthened its commitment to employment for Alaskans with disabilities by moving the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation so that the Division Director reports directly to the DOLWD Commissioner, and by recruiting a new Executive Director of the Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) who will spend 30% of their time focused on disability issues.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, Alaskans with disabilities still experience unemployment and underemployment rates above their nondisabled peers and the percentage of people with disabilities participating in the workforce is far below the rate of people without disabilities. The American Community Survey (ACS) of 2020 found that only 51% of Alaskans with a disability were in the labor force (employed or unemployed), compared to 77% of those without disabilities. According to the Mental Health Trust, 40% of Alaskans with a disability are currently employed, compared to 80% of those without disabilities.³ This is similar to national statistics for working age adults with disabilities: according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 35.1 percent of persons with a disability aged 16-64 were employed in 2021. The comparable number for persons without a disability was 76.3 percent.⁴

Studies Show Comparable Employment Rates for Alaskans with Disabilities



3 Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Beneficiary Employment and Engagement. <https://alaskamenthalhealthtrust.org/alaska-mental-health-trust-authority/what-we-do/beneficiary-employment-and-engagement/> downloaded 3/23/2022

4 Bureau of Labor Statistics news release, February 24, 2022





Formation of the Alaska Work Matters Task Force

The Work Matters Task Force had its origin in the 2018 learning lab “Building Inclusive Talent Pipelines for People with Disabilities,” hosted by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) in collaboration with SEED. Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Indiana, and Maryland were selected to participate in the event, where representatives learned about Wisconsin’s successes and shared best practices with one another and leading subject matter experts. The Alaskans who participated recommended the formation of an employment Task Force to identify strategies that would improve employment outcomes for Alaskans with disabilities. Alaska also participated in the 2019 Western States Policy Collaborative hosted by the National Conference of State Legislatures. This event convened teams of state legislators, members of state executive branches, and state agency officials from six western states for a two-day policy summit at which each state team developed a detailed policy action plan to address ways their state can improve access to employment for people with disabilities. The meeting connected members from the private and non-profit sectors with national experts on state employee hiring practices, accessible transportation, inclusive apprenticeship programs and keeping injured workers in the workforce.

Further discussions were held at the 2019 Alaska Empowerment Through Employment Conference which included high level employment policy discussions with experts from SEED and the Council of State Governments (CSG) as well as presentations from state commissioners of DOLWD, DOH and DFCS. Stakeholders at the conference strongly supported the development of a state Task Force as a logical next step.

Following Governor Dunleavy’s initiative, invitations were sent by the GCDSE director to stakeholder organizations, trust beneficiaries, and businesses requesting a representative to participate in the Task Force. Twenty-four individuals were named to the Task Force, which met four times between June 2021 and December 2022. Please see Appendix A for names and affiliations of Task Force members and others who participated.

Purpose of the Task Force

The purpose of the Task Force⁵ was to review and analyze existing policies, practices, procedures, barriers, and workforce utilization data regarding the employment of people with disabilities in the State of Alaska and to prepare a report that includes recommendations for enhancing employment opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities. More specifically, the Report includes options for consideration by the Governor, applicable state departments, agencies, and commissions of the executive branch as well as options for consideration by the legislative branch.

5 Duane Mayes presentation to Statutory Advisors ACOA, GCDSE, ABADA/AMHB on Alaska Work Matters Employment Task Force, January 2021





Proposed Focus Areas

The original Task Force proposal described eleven “possible enhancement areas:”

1. Making the State a Model Employer of individuals with disabilities, including DVR Provisional Hire.
2. Building the capacity of the private sector to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities
3. Designing Youth transition programs providing career development, work-based learning experiences, and parental involvement
4. Establishing Employment First initiatives recognizing that work in the general workforce (competitive, integrated employment) is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services and supports of all working age individuals with disabilities, including individuals with the most significant disabilities
5. Improving transportation policies to address options that are reliable and accessible for individuals with disabilities
6. Implementing stay-at-work and return-to-work policies and programs for individuals who become ill or injured on or off the job
7. Supporting disability-owned and disabled veteran-owned businesses through procurement and contracting systems
8. Enhancing rural traditional skill development such as subsistence, self-employment, etc.
9. Expanding use of the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Model
10. Developing a policy enhancement recommendation report relating to improving employment outcomes for Alaskans with disabilities
11. Promoting telework as a core employment strategy





Activities

The Task Force held four meetings between March and December 2021, with two additional meetings held by a Subcommittee on Diversity and Inclusion in the Private Sector which included additional members of the business community. A sub-group of the Task Force met one additional time in January 2022 to identify and refine five core topics:

1. State of Alaska as a model employer of individuals with disabilities
2. Building the capacity of the private sector to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities
3. Employment services and supports
4. Preparing for work and transition
5. COVID-19 (Later broadened to “Stay at Work/Return to Work” by the report writing team.)

Task Force members developed the following statements to guide their work:

Task Force Vision:

Alaskans with disabilities have the capacity to become employed and the citizen right to equal access to employment.

Task Force Mission Statement:

Employment is a way for Alaskans with disabilities to become economically self-sufficient, live independently, have equity of opportunity, and full participation in their community resulting in meaningful lives of their choosing.

Definition of a Successful Employment Outcome for Alaskans with Disabilities:

- Competitive and Integrated Employment (CIE)
 - ◆ Part-time or full-time hours in gainful activity
 - ◆ Receiving above minimum wage / comparable to rate paid to other workers without disabilities
 - ◆ Receiving same level of benefits as other workers without disabilities in similar positions
 - ◆ Working alongside other workers without disabilities
 - ◆ Able to advance the career ladder like other workers without disabilities in similar positions
- Commensurate employment for individuals with or without disabilities as available in their communities, including subsistence activities and self-employment





Goals for the Final Report

In addition, the Task Force specified the following goals for the final report:

1. Identify potential areas of greatest impact, including strategies that if accelerated, or barriers that if eliminated, would lead to the greatest advancements toward achieving the goals of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility for applicants and employees with disabilities
2. Identify implementors for Task Force recommendations
3. Provide state policymakers with a roadmap to use in advancing employment opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities

The following sections of this report present the Task Force recommendations in each of the five core topic areas. (The fifth core topic, now titled “Stay at Work/Return to Work,” was expanded by the report writing team beyond the original focus on COVID-19). Going forward, the Governor may want to consider assigning responsibility to the Directors of DVR and GCDSE to establish an ad hoc working group including representatives from relevant beneficiary boards in order to coordinate activities and assess progress with respect to implementation of recommendations included in this report.





SECTION 1: STATE OF ALASKA AS A MODEL EMPLOYER FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES



SECTION 1: STATE OF ALASKA AS A MODEL EMPLOYER FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Set utilization goals for State hiring
- Increase awareness and utilization of the existing Provisional Hire program
- Establish a centralized accommodation fund for state positions
- Increase state employment for people with the most significant disabilities through support for Personal Care Services
- Ensure that all State of Alaska online platforms are fully accessible
- Educate executive and legislative staff about trends and data on employment outcomes

In the 2016 white paper titled “Work Matters: a Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities,” the Council of State Governments and the National Conference of State Legislatures outlined the power and potential for increasing employment for people with disabilities when state government leads by example and “walks the talk,” ensuring that state agencies become model employers. It further identified policy options for consideration by states including development and implementation of strategic plans for becoming a model employer, which includes goals, workforce analyses, barrier analyses, action steps and progress reports, fast track hiring authorities, centralized accommodation funds, personal assistance services, accessible websites, online systems and mobile apps, hiring a stay-at-work and return-to-work coordinator, and an external and internal focus on disability awareness, including disability etiquette, in all state government policies, programs, practices and disability employment initiatives.⁶

Recommendation 1: Set utilization goals for State hiring

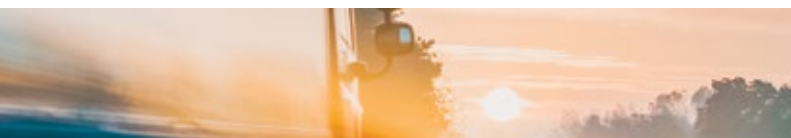
Action Step 1a: Set a goal for hiring of Mental Health Trust Beneficiaries into State positions (whether through the Provisional Hire program or directly).

Beneficiaries of the Trust include people with mental health conditions, Developmental Disabilities, chronic alcohol or drug misuse, Alzheimer’s Disease or related dementia, or Traumatic Brain Injury. Currently there is no specific goal for inclusion of individuals with disabilities in employment with the State of Alaska.

Recommendation 2: Increase awareness and utilization of the existing Provisional Hire program

The Alaska Provisional Hire Program allows state hiring managers to offer provisional appointment without competitive assessment to applicants with severe disabilities for up to four months with the possibility of

⁶ 2016, Whitehouse, Ingram, and Silverstein: Work Matters: a Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities; <https://seed.csg.org/work-matters/>





transitioning to permanent employment. Eligible individuals with disabilities become certified for participation in the provisional hiring program through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, which ensures that the individual meets the minimum qualifications of the position and the requirements for being severely disabled. The Provisional Hire program does not establish a hiring preference for individuals with severe disabilities, and --the hiring manager 1) interviews the qualified individual before beginning the Provisional Hire process and 2) can stop the Provisional Hire process at any time. To utilize this program, hiring managers contact the DVR program manager who coordinates a service team that recruits a candidate matching the job requirements, assists with onboarding and any needed accommodations, and provides consultation for the first four months of employment to ensure that both the employer and employee are satisfied before the employee becomes permanent.

Action Step 2a: Survey hiring managers at State agencies/departments to assess knowledge of and participation in the Provisional Hire program.

Such a survey could also increase awareness of the program and increase participation.

Action Step 2b: Continue outreach to departmental/agency hiring managers, including utilization training.

The DVR coordinator should continue outreach to establish and maintain regular communication with hiring managers. In addition, robust awareness and utilization training about Provisional Hire should be provided to state hiring managers as part of their mandatory initial training and also reviewed with experienced hiring managers on a regular basis.

Action Step 2c: Consider establishment of Provisional Hire goals in each department or agency.

Provisional Hiring has been greatly reduced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. As the Provisional Hire program anticipates returning to the pre-pandemic level of consumer participation and Alaska's economy is being strengthened by oil price increases, hiring managers should be required to annually identify specific positions available for Provisional Hire, reporting this information to DVR whether or not Provisional Hire referrals are made for a given position. The DVR coordinator should track provisional hires and keep a record of hiring by each agency/department; this data should be included in the annual Employment First report. (See Recommendation 6).

Recommendation 3: Establish a centralized accommodation fund for state positions

The Alaska state policy on Anti-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity reiterates the state's minimum responsibility under the ADA by stating, "The State will provide reasonable accommodations or modifications, absent undue hardship, to qualified individuals (employees, job applicants, or members of the public) with a disability so that the individuals can perform the job or access a benefit of employment or civil life. A reasonable accommodation can be a change in the work environment (or in the way things are usually done) to help a person with a disability apply for a job, perform the duties of a job, or enjoy the benefits and privileges of employment." However, the potential cost of some reasonable accommodations, particularly technology and sign language interpreters, may





cause concern to a hiring manager, particularly when budgets are tight.⁷ Many states have found that establishing a discretionary fund for accommodations at the state or agency level can ease the administrative and financial pressure on agency hiring personnel and support better access for applicants with disabilities. For example, Massachusetts operates a Reasonable Accommodation Capital Reserve Account meant to supplement existing agency resources. State agencies may make requests for supplemental funding for accommodations to the Massachusetts Office of Disability and Office of Access and Opportunity; requests are evaluated, and funds disbursed until the reserve account is exhausted for the current fiscal year. In past years, at least \$100,000 has been made available to supplement state agency budgetary resources.

Action Step 3a: Explore instituting a centralized accommodation fund, identifying potential administrative structures, funding sources, and statutory/legislative implications.

A report on this exploration should be submitted to the Department of Administration HR division; further action steps can be identified once this information has been analyzed.

Recommendation 4: Increase state employment for people with the most significant disabilities through support for Personal Care Service

Some individuals with significant disabilities need Personal Care Services (such as assistance in eating and toileting) in order to spend any significant time in the workplace. These services are not required by the ADA (although federal employment supports them as part of their affirmative action policy) and are not currently required or supported by the State of Alaska. Other states have instituted this type of support; for example, the Florida Legislature created the James Patrick Memorial Work Incentive Personal Attendant Services & Employment Assistance Program to help working age adults with significant disabilities by providing monthly reimbursement to help offset the cost of needed personal care assistance.⁸

Action Step 4a: Provide training for hiring managers on how Medicaid recipients receiving Personal Care Services can utilize those services at work.

DHHS regulations issued in 2021 clarify that Medicaid recipients receiving PCS services in their homes may also receive those services at the workplace if necessary.⁹

Action Step 4b: Explore establishing a fund to pay for Personal Care Services for state employees with the most significant disabilities who do not receive these services through Medicaid.

This exploration should include potential administrative structures, funding sources, and statutory/legislative implications. A report on this exploration should be submitted to the Department of Administration HR division; further action steps can be identified once this information has been analyzed.

7 State of Alaska Policy on Anti-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity

8 Center for Independent Living of Northwest Florida, James Patrick Memorial Work Incentive Personal Attendant Services & Employment Assistance Program. <https://cilnwf.org/programs/the-james-patrick-memorial-work-incentive/>

9 Department of Health and Social Services regulations re: Medicaid coverage and payment, home and community-based waiver services, employment services; Effective 9/9/21





Recommendation 5: Ensure that all State of Alaska online platforms are fully accessible

At a minimum, all Internet-based material published by the State should comply with federal laws prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including laws outlining accessibility requirements for electronic and information technologies. The result will be a more fully inclusive state workforce and increased availability of governmental services to all members of the public.

Action Step 5a: Enact the already drafted Policies and Procedures for Accessibility of Information and Communication Technology.

The latest draft version of the policy has been approved by the Office of Information Technology (OIT), the Web Accessibility Working Group and the State ADA Coordinator. As of June 2022, it is pending final approval by the Commissioner of the Department of Administration.

Action Step 5b: Establish design standards for State of Alaska websites.

This will ensure that accessibility concerns are consistently addressed as well as providing a consistent online presence for the State of Alaska.

Action Step 5c: Provide training on accessibility and design standards for state employees involved in creating or contributing to state website platforms.

Currently there are ADA website requirements in place but no training or support.

Recommendation 6: Educate executive and legislative staff about disability employment trends and data on employment outcomes

As required by the Employment First bill passed in 2014, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) produces an annual report summarizing employment activities and outcomes achieved by DVR as well as the Divisions of Employment & Training, Behavioral Health, Senior and Disability Services, and Special Education. This report is submitted to the Trustees of the Mental Health Trust as well as the Commissioners of the Departments of Labor & Workforce Development, Health & Social Services, and Education & Early Development for the purpose of making policy recommendations that might further employment for Alaskans with disabilities in both the public and private sectors.

Action Step 6a: Create a consistent reporting template and require agencies to use it in submitting data for the report.

This will better enable DVR to synthesize and analyze the data, creating a stronger and more easily understandable report.





Action Step 6b: Create a brief Executive Summary of report findings and recommendations from each annual report.

This version should provide easily reviewed bullet points of data and clear recommendations.

Action Step 6c: Share the summary report with the Governor's Office via an annual meeting; distribute the annual report to relevant staff for their review.

Action Step 6d: Make both the annual summary report and full report available to the public online.





SECTION 2: BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO ENHANCE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES





SECTION 2: BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO ENHANCE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build on the existing BEST Teams to increase collaboration between private sector employers and the State of Alaska
- Continue planning and implementing job fairs (including virtual and reverse job fairs) to connect employers and job seekers with disabilities
- Increase the number of students with disabilities served by the Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC)
- Increase the number of people with disabilities involved in apprenticeships and internships
- Support disability-owned and disabled veteran-owned businesses through procurement and contracting systems
- Reduce hiring barriers for job seekers with justice system involvement

State governments can leverage their own disability inclusion work to cultivate strong working relationships with private employers and address mutual interests. Engaging the business community can provide a two-fold benefit to state workforce development efforts. According to *State Policy Options for Employing People with Disabilities*, a LegisBrief published by the National Conference of State Legislatures, evidence suggests that increasing disability representation in the workforce benefits both business needs and state priorities.¹⁰

Because businesses are always looking for highly qualified, skilled workers to enhance their productivity and improve their bottom line, governors and state lawmakers can respond by introducing businesses to workers with disabilities who remain a largely untapped segment of the labor pool. States can act as a recruiter, providing connections between skilled workers with disabilities and employers as well as technical assistance and resource support to both parties during employment.

Second, state governments are able to lean on highly engaged businesses to help inform workforce development strategy and realize long-term budget savings as a result of private sector hiring increases. When successful recruitment and retention occurs and workers with disabilities are no longer as dependent on cash, medical and disability benefits, state governments grow the taxpayer base while simultaneously lowering benefits administration costs.¹¹

¹⁰ 2015. Reed, James B., "State Policy Options for Employing People with Disabilities," National Conference of State Legislatures, LegisBrief, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/state-policy-options-for-employing-people-with-disabilities.aspx>

¹¹ 2016. Whitehouse, Ingram, and Silverstein: *Work Matters: a Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities*; The Council of State Governments, Disability Employment Policy, <https://seed.csg.org/work-matters/>





Recommendation 7: Build on the existing Business Engagement Services (BEST) Teams to increase collaboration between private sector employers and the State of Alaska

BEST teams exist in all five DOL regions of Alaska, are led by a Business Engagement specialist from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) who works with regional businesses and recruiters, and include representatives from Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation (TVR) programs and other state divisions including Employment and Training Services, Dislocated Worker Program, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Business Connections staff at the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and Alaska Workforce Investment Board apprenticeship coordinators. The following specific action steps build on the existing structure to further engage private sector employers in disability inclusion efforts.

Action Step 7a: Establish an ongoing Private Sector Employer (PSE) Subcommittee within the Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) to identify ongoing employer needs and disseminate information.

DVR should take the lead in the development and management of the committee along with PSE representatives; Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation (TVR) Programs and other Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) Divisions such as Employment and Training Services should also be included.

Action Step 7b: Provide resources to private sector employers on how to be disability friendly and promote disclosure by applicants and current employees, accommodation and retention resources for employees with disabilities, and other topics as needed.

While there exists a lot of employer-oriented information on these topics (for example, the Job Accommodation Network website),¹² it takes an ongoing effort to continually connect the information with those who need it. BEST Team members can fulfill this role by providing training (recorded or interactive), sharing information about existing resources, and developing new resources such as videos with ideas on how to approach disclosure of disability.

Action Step 7c: Develop and implement a Workforce Diversity Symposium with a focus on benefits to businesses.

The Symposium could stand alone or be paired with another activity such as the Empowerment for Employment conference sponsored by the Mental Health Trust. As of June 2022, planning for the first Symposium is already underway and involves the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCCP) along with DVR, the Trust, and business representatives.

Action Step 7d: Reach out to business organizations and higher education programs in business and human resources to offer training and resources on disabilities and inclusivity in the workplace.

College-level curricula in business and human resources seldom offer a significant amount of content relating to inclusivity and diversity relating to disability. This represents a missed opportunity to educate potential future employers about the value of workers (or customers) with disabilities. Similarly, business organizations such as

¹² Job Accommodation Network (JAN), <https://askjan.org/>





Chambers of Commerce provide valuable access to local employers. BEST team members from DVR and partner agencies have the knowledge and expertise to provide this information, perhaps in cooperation with business champions.

Action Step 7e: Reach out to and support federal contractors and sub-contractors in meeting their OFCCP obligations.

Federal contractors/subcontractors are required to meet a 7% utilization goal to target individuals with disabilities in the hiring process. BEST teams, in partnership with the OFCCP, are in an ideal position to share resources such as those available through the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) to assist these contractors in recruiting, hiring, and supporting job seekers with disabilities.¹³ The Government Contracts website¹⁴ lists 25 government contractors in Alaska in addition to 2771 defense contractors¹⁵; although these are 2020 figures, it is clear that federal funds are supporting thousands of jobs that should be accessible by Alaskans with disabilities.

Recommendation 8: Continue planning and implementing job fairs (including virtual and reverse job fairs) to connect employers and job seekers with disabilities.

Job fairs (also called career fairs) connecting employers and job seekers are currently sponsored by DVR, Alaska Department of Employment and Training Services, Alaska Job Centers, the Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, Municipalities, Tribal VR programs, Alaska Department of Health, Divisions of Behavioral Health and the Alaska Department of Family and Community Services, Division of Juvenile Justice, post-secondary schools, and industry trade associations. These events typically involve a several-hour time period where multiple employers and recruiters set up tables or booths to give information to potential employees, and job seekers have a chance to meet these individuals and learn about different employment opportunities. More recently, job fairs have been held online using a virtual platform which allows employers to meet with potential applicants and utilize video, live chats, and downloadable material. Agencies serving individuals with disabilities are also utilizing reverse job fairs where job seekers create displays and presentations that highlight their talents, while employers have the opportunity to circulate among the booths and introduce themselves to the job seekers whose skills and abilities meet their needs. This approach helps job candidates display their skills and abilities in a comfortable environment, while helping businesses to recognize the talents of the job candidates by watching them demonstrate examples of their work/abilities.¹⁶

13 Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN), <https://askearn.org/>

14 Government Contracts, Government Contractors, Results for Alaska. <https://www.governmentcontracts.us/government-contractors/search.htm?loc=Alaska&page=45>, accessed 4/11/2022

15 GovernmentContractsWon.com, Defence Contractor Search by State. <https://www.governmentcontractswon.com/search.asp?type=dt> accessed 4/11/2022

16 Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (undated): Organizing a Reverse Career Fair, The “How-To” Guide





Action Step 8a: Develop and sponsor job fairs for a broad range of job seekers, including at-risk youth and transition students.

Face to face, reverse, and virtual job fairs should be developed to address the needs and interests of job seekers with a variety of employment barriers including people with disabilities, people with justice system involvement, at-risk youth, foster system graduates, and school to work transition. The regional BEST teams provide a natural cross-agency resource for coordinating and planning these events along with local businesses.

Action Step 8b: Ensure accessibility for both virtual and face-to-face job fairs.

Broadening sponsorship of job fairs to include businesses and non-disability related state agencies implies that efforts must be made to build in accessibility by job seekers with disabilities. Locations must be physically accessible; technology for virtual job fairs must follow universal design and work with assistive technology such as screen readers; sign language interpreters must be provided as needed. Resources for planning and ensuring accessibility include DVR, Tribal VR Programs, The Northwest ADA Information Center, and the Alaska State ADA Coordinator.

Recommendation 9: Increase the number of students with disabilities served by the Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC).

The Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center is a division of DOLWD that provides 90- to 180-day training programs in 13 different trades leading to positions in the oil and gas, business and health care, mining, marine transportation, tourism and hospitality industries. Students who complete training enter the workforce, the military, or an apprenticeship program.¹⁷ Located in Seward, AVTEC boasts a 95% placement rate for its graduates but people with disabilities are underrepresented among the training participants.

Action Step 9a: Assess AVTEC utilization by students by disabilities and establish benchmarks.

The first step in helping more students with disabilities access AVTEC training is to complete a current assessment of utilization and use that information to establish benchmarks for participation. The Director of AVTEC will work with DVR and the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to plan and implement this assessment.

Action Step 9b: Access resources for and provide training on disability service awareness and accommodations for AVTEC staff.

Training AVTEC staff on disability etiquette and common accommodations will help make AVTEC programs more welcoming and supportive to students with disabilities. There are many training resources on these topics already available; if needed, DVR or the state ADA coordinator can assist in evaluating and selecting the most appropriate.

Action Step 9c: Continue providing the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) Academy online so students throughout Alaska can apply.

¹⁷ Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC), AVTEC Programs, <https://avtec.edu/training-program-summary>





Prior to the COVID pandemic, potential students had to travel to Seward in order to take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) as part of their application to AVTEC programs. This requirement posed a barrier for many potential students with disabilities. Currently the test is available online which has increased access.

Recommendation 10: Increase the number of people with disabilities involved in apprenticeships and internships.

The need for skilled workers continues to rise faster than the current supply of workers in the United States job market. Weaknesses in skill level also affect businesses' ability to recruit and retain a productive workforce. This issue has a greater impact on populations who are already at a disadvantage in obtaining employment, such as individuals from minority backgrounds, people with disabilities, and women. Paid work experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, are effective "earn while you learn" models for training skilled workers, including those with disabilities.¹⁸

There are currently 39 registered apprenticeship programs in Alaska¹⁹ in areas ranging from aviation to healthcare. The DOLWD is currently implementing a \$4 million project to expand the apprenticeship model throughout the state through applying for grants from the AWIB. Any grant proposals under this project must address the potential benefit to Alaskans with disabilities.

Action Step 10a: Educate DOLWD staff about apprenticeships, who can apply, and what job sectors they are focused on.

Many employment professionals have preconceived notions of apprenticeships and may not realize the breadth of the job sectors involved or have the details about available programs. Training and informational resources should be provided to DOLWD staff including those at Alaska Job Centers and made available to partners such as Tribal VR programs as well as included in DVR's annual in-house staff training.

Action Step 10b: Complete a survey of current registered apprenticeships and state internships for accessibility and marketing strategy enhancement for individuals with disabilities.

The AWIB committee on apprenticeship along with DVR should work with the 39 registered apprenticeship programs to assess accessibility and outreach to possible participants with disabilities and offer information and resources to improve their programs if needed and desired. This evaluation should also be suggested to the State of Alaska Internship Program and made available to private sector employers that offer internships through the Alaska Job Centers.

Action Step 10c: Expand the use of the federal Workforce Recruitment Program for college students and recent college graduates with disabilities by increasing the number of participating Institutions of Higher Education.²⁰

18 Institute for Community Inclusion, UMASS Boston, Apprenticeships Toolkit, <https://www.explorevr.org/toolkits/apprenticeships-toolkit>

19 Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Apprenticeships, Current Registered Apprenticeship Programs, <https://www.ajcn.state.ak.us/apprentice/job-seekers/apprenticeship-programs.html>

20 Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, and Department of Defense, The Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP), <https://www.wrp.gov/wrp>





In order to access internships or permanent employment with federal agencies, candidates can apply to the WRP each fall through participating campuses managed by a School Coordinator and can receive elective informational interviews with federal employees who serve as volunteer recruiters. Candidates represent all majors and range from college first-year students to graduate- and law-school students. Information from candidates is compiled in a searchable database that is available to employers. As of 2022, the University of Alaska/Fairbanks is the only participating campus in Alaska, which significantly limits the number of Alaskan students that can participate and benefit.

Recommendation 11: Support disability-owned and disabled veteran-owned businesses through procurement and contracting systems.

Alaska currently has an Alaskans with Disabilities Preference where bidders that are corporations, sole proprietorships, LLCs, or partnerships involving only individuals with a disability receive a 10% preference on their application. DVR certifies the applicant. As of 1/6/22, there are only three disability-owned businesses in the whole state that are certified for the current year, indicating potential for expansion of this program.

Action Step 11a: Establish a short-term focus group involving DVR, Tribal VR, the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs, and state procurement/contracting plus businesses to develop three recommendations for outreach to disability-owned and disabled veteran-owned businesses.

Outreach could include PSAs, flyers, social media as well as contact from the BEST team. Training should also be considered.

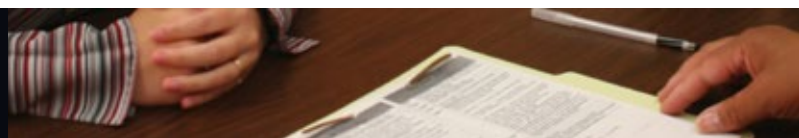
Action Step 11b: Consider establishing a state contractor utilization goal (similar to the federal goal).

Currently, contractors doing business with the State are not required to establish goals for recruiting or hiring employees with disabilities. The Task Force recommends that the Office of the Governor work with the Mental Health Trust to explore the establishment of an affirmative action utilization goal for contractors. This exploration should include potential administrative structures, impact on contractors, and statutory/legislative implications.

Recommendation 12: Reduce hiring barriers for job seekers with justice system involvement.

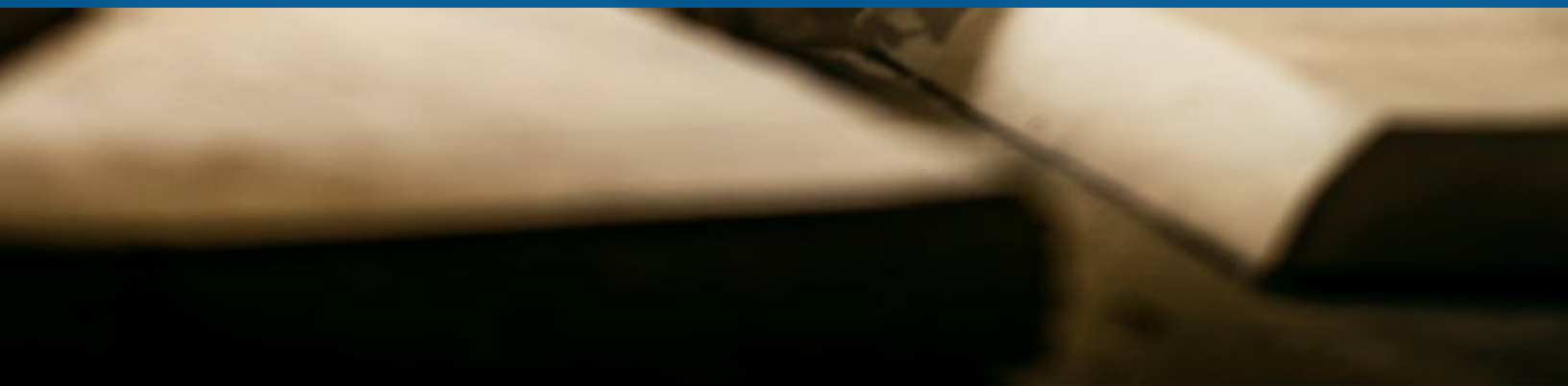
Anyone applying to work as a provider of home care, home and community-based waiver services, or behavioral health services must undergo a background check administered by the Division of Health Care Services Background Check Unit (part of the Department of Health). Currently these checks are taking an extended time to be completed, resulting in applicants losing opportunities for employment. Other applicants are being denied variances that would allow them to access behavioral health positions. While background checks may be a necessary protection for vulnerable service recipients, the current system presents unnecessary barriers for qualified job seekers.

Action Step 12a: Complete a thorough analysis and evaluation of the Division of Health Care Services Background Check Program.





SECTION 3: EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS





SECTION 3: EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

"When you are working, you are part of the real world. You feel connected. Having a job gives me stability. I have something to look forward to every day."²¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen State support for Employment First.
- Strengthen implementation of the state Medicaid plan and waivers to better support employment services and outcomes.
- Expand the use of the Individual Placement and Supports (IPS) model for people with mental health conditions or substance use disorders.
- Improve transportation policies to require options that are reliable and accessible for individuals with disabilities.
- Support rural traditional skill development such as subsistence and self-employment.

People with disabilities experience poverty and economic insecurity in substantial numbers and disproportionately compared to individuals without disabilities. Common sense as well as evidence suggests that employment is the most direct and cost-effective means to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve independence, economic self-sufficiency, and a sense of dignity and self-worth. Individuals with disabilities bring valuable skills to the workforce and represent an untapped segment of the labor pool for public, private and nonprofit sector employment. However, some people with disabilities need services and supports in order to develop and meet their employment goals.

Recommendation 13: Strengthen State support for Employment First.

The state commitment to Employment First affirms that competitive, integrated employment in the general workforce is the preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services and supports of all working age individuals with disabilities, including individuals with the most significant disabilities. Ensuring that all agency policies and regulations are consistent with the Employment First goal and widely sharing statewide outcomes will continue to move the state toward better outcomes for citizens with disabilities.

Action Step 13a: Repeal subminimum wage law (14c) to complement the regulation already repealed in this area.

Alaska has eliminated the authority to pay sub-minimum wage by regulation; a new bill makes it impossible to reinstate authority for employers to pay sub-minimum wage via regulatory action. (This bill was passed by the Legislature and is awaiting signature by the Governor as of June 2022.)

²¹ Individual Placement and Support (IPS), Employment Center, <https://ipsworks.org/>





Action Step 13b: Review how employment for individuals with disabilities is listed in state agency policies, procedures, and regulation.

All listings must describe the desired outcome of employment-related services as competitive integrated employment (CIE), self-employment, or traditional subsistence activities.

Action Step 13c: Require that all agencies involved in Employment First report outcome data using a uniform template.

This template should include work setting/type (e.g., individual integrated job, group supported employment, self-employment, subsistence employment), average hours worked per month, weekly or monthly gross income, employer provided benefits, and employment retention in a quarter and year (i.e., days or weeks working in the community in the time period even if the person changed jobs). The template should also have sections addressing self-employment and subsistence outcomes.

Action Step 13d: Review existing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment First partners to determine whether they need to be enhanced to reflect this reporting requirement.

Action Step 13e: Publish annual Employment First outcomes online as a data dashboard or other summary with bullet points in plain language.

Make the information available through the websites of all Employment First partners (e.g., DOLWD, DEED, DOH, DFCS, Mental Health Trust, etc.)

Action Step 13f: Share Employment First outcomes summary with Alaska State leadership, including all Commissioners, Chairs of Senate and House, and Cabinet members.

Action Step 13g: Expand the annual Employment First report to include progress on recommendations made by the 20W21-2022 Work Matters Task Force.

A continued focus on recommended changes will enhance the likelihood of changes being implemented.

Recommendation 14: Strengthen implementation of the state Medicaid plan and waivers to better support employment services and outcomes.

Since 1983 when Congress authorized Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) via section 1915(c) of the Social Security Act and gave states the option to receive a waiver of rules governing institutional care, Medicaid has become the primary financial resource for publicly funded employment services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Alaska's current HCBS waivers allow financial support for services including supported employment and transportation; 2022 regulations add support for career advancement and/or meaningful lives of the person's choosing; employment services provided at the recipient's home for self-employment, subsistence activities, or remote paid work; virtual job coaching; and flexibility for accessing personal care services for employment.





Action Step 14a: Broadly disseminate information about service options available through the waiver program.

Many participants are ill-informed about the scope of existing waiver services as well as the new regulations. This information should be broadly distributed to service providers, advocacy groups including peer advocates, and participants/families.

Action Step 14b: Investigate how to include supported employment services in the 1115 waiver.

Alaska’s Medicaid Behavioral Health Demonstration Waiver (1115 Waiver) was approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in 2019. The 1115 Waiver provides an integrated behavioral health system of care for children, youth, and adults with serious mental illness, severe emotional disturbance, and/or substance use disorders. Services include residential treatment for substance use disorder, partial hospitalization program services for substance use disorder and behavioral health, adult mental health residential services, and mobile outreach and crisis response services – but not employment. A workgroup should research options for either adding employment to the existing waiver or developing a new 1115 waiver focusing on employment.

Recommendation 15: Expand the use of the Individual Placement and Supports (IPS) model for people with mental health conditions or substance use disorders.²²

Alaska’s behavioral health system is complex. State grants and Medicaid provide mental health and/or substance misuse treatment for specific, eligible populations through as many as 100 behavioral health serving agencies throughout the state; agencies vary in size and sometimes in target population (e.g., an agency may serve only children and youth). Few agencies provide significant employment services to clients beyond referral to DVR.

According to SAMHSA (US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), 2020 data shows that only 33% of Alaskans with Serious Mental Illness are employed and 3.5% are receiving supported employment services. Establishing and supporting IPS services across the state will increase the number of individuals receiving effective employment services and attaining stable employment.²³

Four agencies are currently receiving grants from the Department of Behavioral Health to establish or maintain Individual Placement and Support programs that meet requirements of fidelity to the model. One program is doing well; the others were brand new when the pandemic hit in 2020 and are currently working on resuming services. Every program is struggling with hiring and retaining staff. Alaska DVR funds are not currently being used to support IPS placements, although this is being done successfully in other states; there are concerns about different priorities/approaches between the two systems such as rapid job search in IPS vs. structured development of an Individual Plan for Employment in VR.

Action Step 15a: Increase awareness of the IPS model by educating decision makers (e.g., Commissioners, members of the legislature, agency directors) on how it is different than the traditional vocational model, and on success accomplished in other states.

²² Please see Appendix B for more detailed information on the IPS model including research about its effectiveness.

²³ Alaska 2020 Mental Health National Outcome Measures (NOMS): SAMHSA Uniform Reporting System





Many states have successfully adopted the IPS model. For example, Oregon VR works closely with 35 IPS providers as well as the Oregon Supported Employment Center for Excellence to serve individuals with serious mental illness across the state. The national IPS Center (IPSWorks.org) offers a wide range of informational materials on the IPS model and how it can be implemented. Outreach and education are needed to promote the IPS model in Alaska.

Action Step 15b: Change the paradigm around employment as part of recovery by educating behavioral health providers on Employment First practices as well as IPS.

For Alaskans with mental health and substance misuse disorders, employment and economic stability are key factors for treatment and recovery. Employment has a positive impact on self-esteem, life satisfaction, and reducing symptoms. In spite of this evidence, mental health service systems (and professionals) typically see employment as an add-on service rather than an integral part of recovery. Both the State of Alaska and behavioral health providers should be encouraged to implement Employment First practices for Alaskans with behavioral health disorders.

Action Step 15c: Develop IPS programs in at least one location in each of the 9 Behavioral Health regions.

Three of the current IPS programs are located in the same region; neither Anchorage nor Fairbanks are served by an IPS program. Expanding IPS programs into about 10% of Alaska’s behavioral health agencies across the state will allow successful demonstration of the model and encourage further replication.

Action Step 15d: Continue to provide information and training on IPS and the IPS/VR crosswalk to DVR staff and supervisors.

Other states have developed and documented successful approaches to coordinating VR and IPS services; information from these states and from the national IPS Center can be used to educate DVR leadership and staff, particularly in areas where new IPS programs are being instituted. These efforts are already underway and should be continued and expanded.

Action Step 15e: Make IPS a billable service under DBH / Medicaid.

IPS services are currently being provided using grants from the Division of Behavioral Health for that specific purpose and it may be that this contributes to IPS being seen as an experimental or peripheral service by some behavioral health agencies. Including IPS as a billable service under DBH/Medicaid funds will increase the financial resources available for this service and encourage other behavioral health agencies to invest in program development.





Action Step 15f: Increase utilization of employment focused support provided by trained Peer Support Specialists.

As vocational mentors or coaches, peers (Alaskans with lived experience of mental health and/or substance misuse disorders) offer pre- and post-employment support individually and in groups. The goal of IPS is to help people find competitive employment as soon as they express interest, and participants benefit from complementary peer services to promote vocational recovery. Peer support is beneficial before, during, and after a job is secured.

Action Step 15g: Develop targeted recruitment and retention strategies for IPS specialists.

All behavioral health agencies are experiencing difficulty in recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified staff. The IPS model cannot be implemented without trained specialists.

Recommendation 16: Improve transportation policies to require options that are reliable and accessible for individuals with disabilities.

Although remote work has expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic started, many working individuals with disabilities must leave their homes to go to work. Whether that means using public transportation (where available), ride sharing, or transporting oneself via car, foot, bicycle, scooter or wheelchair, the availability of reliable and accessible transportation is a crucial factor in expanding employment opportunities.²⁴

State and local governmental agencies must provide pedestrian access for people with disabilities in compliance with ADA Title II; Title III of the ADA requires any covered business to maintain features including accessible parking spaces and the accessible route from the parking space to the main entrance, which means access aisles, curb cuts, and sidewalks as well as an accessible route from a bus stop to its entrance. In Alaska, these requirements often involve removal of snow and ice. People with disabilities who don't drive primarily rely on sidewalks and other pedestrian rights of way to access their community; therefore, it is important to keep these public thoroughfares clear. Wheelchairs and other mobility aids can become difficult to navigate on sidewalks, curb ramps, and streets after snow or ice have fallen. For those who have balance issues, or who use a cane or walker, patches of snow and/or ice can be potentially dangerous, as well.

Action Step 16a: Develop a Department of Transportation website section focusing on accessible transportation options and how to apply for their services.

This section should also include links to external resources and websites like the Alaska Marine Highway System and should be accessible via a hot button on the DOT home page as well as from the DVR home page.

Action Step 16b: Require ride-sharing companies (e.g., Lyft/Uber) to provide access to accessible vehicles OR provide information on other transportation resources when accessible vehicles are requested and not available.

²⁴ Please see Appendix C for additional background information on Alaska transportation issues.





Recommendation 17: Support rural traditional skill development such as subsistence and self-employment.

Many Alaskans live in rural or remote communities where conventional wage-employment opportunities are limited and citizens with and without disabilities participate in subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, and food gathering, as well as starting businesses that meet the needs of other community members. Support for people with disabilities who choose subsistence or self-employment is often provided by the 12 federally funded Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation (TVR) programs that largely serve remote/rural areas; state DVR may also be involved. Some individuals fish, hunt, pick, or grow their own food; others start small businesses using material that comes from animals, fish, or the land. Individuals who choose these types of employment goals may benefit from services and supports such as skill training, business plan development, assistance in financial management, disability accommodations, mentorship, and problem-solving support.

Action Step 17a: Increase awareness of the diversity of successful employment outcomes for Alaskans with disabilities.

Subsistence and self-employment can both be successful employment outcomes for DVR; however, staff of DVR and other state agencies may not be aware of this or know how to assist someone in achieving these goals. Agencies involved in employment support should focus on a commensurate life experience/employment outcome for someone with a disability in a given region as for someone without a disability in a given region realizing that employment outcomes in urban Alaska will look vastly different for rural and remote Alaska.

Action Step 17b: Increase commitment to state agency collaborations with Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Programs through expanding the DVR/TVR Consortium.

The state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the 12 Tribal VR Programs just updated their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and recommitted to the statewide DVR/TVR Consortium, agreeing to increase communication and setting a goal of serving more individuals jointly. Formal inclusion of other state divisions such as the Department of Corrections, the Department of Health, and Department of Family and Community Services as well as development of MOUs between these divisions and TVR programs, has the potential to increase positive outcomes for people with disabilities in rural/remote communities.





SECTION 4: PREPARING FOR WORK AND SECONDARY TRANSITION





SECTION 4: PREPARING FOR WORK AND SECONDARY TRANSITION

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand and improve existing School-to-Work transition resources for school personnel
- Strengthen the At-Risk Youth Initiative

Finding the right job—or even knowing what it might be—is not easy, even for highly skilled individuals. Doing so is even more difficult for those who face risk factors like poverty or family instability, or special challenges such as a disability. Transition from school to work constitutes an important juncture in the lifelong process for all learners, as they move from more known, predictable environments, and more clearly defined pathways, into new open, less controlled, and less certain and predictable terrain. However, many of these students drop out of high school before graduating, leaving them even more unprepared for and less likely to obtain a job.

Recommendation 18: Expand and improve existing School-to-Work transition resources for school personnel.

Federal laws such as the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, last amended in 2015) and the Rehabilitation Act (amended as part of WIOA in 2014) require a range of school-to-work planning and activities but students with disabilities continue to face postschool outcomes in which they are less prepared for adulthood than their peers without disabilities. This discrepancy may be due, in part, to secondary special educators feeling unprepared to plan for and deliver Secondary Transition services. Alaska faces a further challenge in that many school districts are having difficulty filling Special Education teaching positions and often have to use regular teachers to cover classrooms with training and mentoring assistance from the state Educational Service Agency (SERRC). A comment from DVR’s recent teacher survey: “There are a number of villages in our district that only have an itinerant Special Ed teacher. Most of the teachers and Site Administration are transplants from the Lower 48. They have not even been on the State Website and are unaware of what is available for special needs young adults.”

In addition to a wide range of national resources (e.g., the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth or CAPE Youth²⁵) Alaska has many Secondary Transition assets already in place. There is an established Interagency Transition Council (AITC) involving key staff from DEED’s Special Education Department, DVR, the state Educational Service Agency (SERRC), Tribal VR programs, urban and rural school districts, and parents. VR and SERRC have developed a website that provides curriculum modules and pre-recorded lessons for teachers to use in the classroom, transition camps and other webinars for students, and resources for families (TransitionAlaska.org); over 700 people are utilizing these resources. DVR has also developed a “Picture Your Future” workbook and teachers guide that is available on the DVR website. DEED and DVR have a data sharing agreement so that information about students participating in these Secondary Transition activities can be tracked for the reporting required by WIOA. DVR and DEED have been providing annual continuing education

²⁵ Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth (CAPE-Youth), <https://capeyouth.org/>





classes on Secondary Transition to school personnel, both face-to-face and in a virtual format, enabling teachers and school administrators to meet their CEU requirements by improving their Secondary Transition skills and knowledge. However, there remain many gaps in teacher preparation and training. More than two-thirds of teachers responding to the recent survey identified these training needs: Basic training on supporting work experiences (job development and job supports); information and resources for accessing state and federal post-secondary transition services (I/DD, Behavioral Health, Social Security); information on coordinating pre-employment transition services with DVR; and information around appropriate referral and eligibility for DVR services.

Action Step 18a: Explore the possibility of requiring Secondary Transition competencies as part of Special Education teacher certification or developing a formal endorsement in Secondary Transition.

Many special education teachers are uninformed about Secondary Transition services or how to write school-to-work transition goals as part of an IEP. Studies have shown that secondary special educators have a lack of knowledge and skills that hinders their ability to implement effective Secondary Transition practices. Consequently, teachers who are unprepared to plan and deliver Secondary Transition services may be inadvertently contributing to the poor outcomes of students with disabilities.²⁶

Action Step 18b: Assess the most effective way to make Secondary Transition training available to existing school personnel.

DVR currently offers a distance class on writing Secondary Transition goals that attracts over 150 teachers and Special Education Directors and offers continuing education credits. Before the pandemic, this class was provided as a two-day workshop that included live practice in learning about community businesses as well as other skill-development activities that are not possible in a virtual format. Efforts should be made to evaluate the cost-benefit of each model going forward.

Action Step 18c: Broadly disseminate information about available Secondary Transition curriculum resources and continuing education opportunities; develop and maintain an email list of Special Education teachers.

This information should go to every school district special education administrator, every school, every special education teacher, and teacher training programs. With teacher turnover being above 34% in Alaska and over 50% in some rural areas, information dissemination is a constant challenge.

Action Step 18d: Pursue funding to further develop resources available through the TransitionAlaska.org website.

This effort might extend the recent survey of teachers to assess their use of existing resources and identify additional products and services that would help them meet Secondary Transition goals. Once gaps have been identified additional funding will be needed for development and dissemination.

26 Morningstar and Mazzotti, *Teacher Preparation to Deliver Evidence-Based Transition Planning and Services to Youth with Disabilities*, 2014





Recommendation 19: Strengthen the At-Risk Youth Initiative.

The term at-risk youth does not have a specific definition. Most of the time, “at risk” means at risk of some particular outcome, such as being involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, dropping out of school, or having a behavioral health disorder. Poor academic success, even if they stay in school, and poor relationships can also be outcomes for at risk youth. Another comment from the recent teacher survey: “Many of my students are dealing with issues like parenting, legal issues, homelessness, care of siblings/elders. They have to work to survive instead of trying to set up a career plan.”

Though the definition of at-risk youth is vague, there are some factors that clearly put children in this category. These factors include:

- **Poverty** – Children who live without sufficient income struggle with their daily living needs. As a result, they cannot focus on school and building healthy relationships, and they become at risk.
- **Family instability or dysfunction** – Divorce, violence in the home, job loss, mental health needs in the parents, and similar dysfunction at home all increase a child’s risk of becoming at-risk.
- **Unstable school environment** – Students who switch schools regularly or who have poor academic support at school are at higher risk for problems.
- **Poor community resources** – When community resources to get help are lacking, or when children can’t access them, they are at higher risk.
- **Adverse childhood experiences** – Trauma, neglect, abuse, parents or guardians with behavioral health concerns or who are involved in the criminal justice system, can lead to adverse childhood experiences that put youth at risk²⁷

In addition, the majority of at-risk youth have some type of disability and a significant percentage need independent living skill training in order to function independently in the community.

Prior to the COVID changes beginning in 2020, Alaska had created a standing committee to address the needs of at-risk youth. Relevant state government divisions were identified and met with the Office of Children’s Services director; however, this effort was tabled by the need to address the pandemic. The Department of Labor and Workforce Development did continue these efforts by creating three temporary positions to address the needs of at-risk youth.

Action Step 19a: Reestablish a Standing Committee on At-Risk Youth to coordinate planning and delivery of employment and other services.

The Committee should meet virtually or in person every six months, and include operational managers from the Office of Children Services/Independent Living Program (OCS), the Division of Employment & Training Services (DETS), the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB), the Department of Education (DEED), the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), the Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC), the State Independent Living Council (SILC) and Independent Living Centers.

²⁷ At Risk Youth Programs, <https://atriskyouthprograms.com/>





Action Step 19b: Create and implement an At-Risk Youth Score Card that includes key divisions in the state system.

Beneficiary Boards should use this annual data summary to set policy and educate the Legislature, and to evaluate efforts to support at-risk youth in becoming employed.

Action Step 19c: Maximize youth grants/funding within the state system (DOLWD, DOH, DFCS, DEED) and measure success through the At-Risk Youth scorecard.

Action Step 19d: Make the current DOLWD positions assigned to the At-Risk Youth Initiative permanent. Permanent positions will underscore the state’s commitment to the At-Risk Youth Initiative.

Action Step 19e: Create a new referral form to be used by all relevant divisions.

This will help create a seamless system where everyone is working together to improve employment outcomes for at-risk youth.

Action Step 19f: Develop and distribute a Youth Survival Guide (YSG)

This product would help at-risk youth and their advocates to understand and access available resources and should be developed in collaboration with United Way 211, the Developmental Disabilities Resource Connection (DDRC), and the Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs).





SECTION 5: STAY AT WORK, RETURN TO WORK





SECTION 5: STAY AT WORK, RETURN TO WORK

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve stay-at-work and return-to-work policies and programs for individuals who become ill or injured on the job
- Support and encourage teleworking where possible and desirable
- Invest in Post-COVID health and safety Planning
- Support and expand the Senior Employment Initiative

Some employed Alaskans experience the onset of or a change in a medical condition that challenges their ability to work. Others may lose their positions due to employer management changes or layoffs. Many of these workers are at risk of leaving the labor force, especially if they do not receive timely and effective support to stay at work or return to work. Staying connected to the workforce has a positive effect on individual and family health and well-being, quality of life and standard of living.

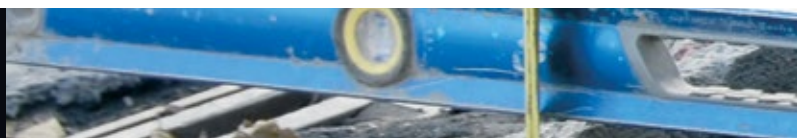
When workers are able to stay in the labor force or return to work after experiencing illness or injury, they are able to continue earning money and enjoy the self-esteem and other advantages that come from employment. Employers can benefit from the experience of long-tenured workers, spend less money and time on hiring new workers, and potentially spend less on workers compensation benefits and premiums for private disability insurance. The benefits to the state include helping workers and their families retain economic self-sufficiency and quality of life; expanding state economies and fiscal health by increasing tax revenues from wage earners; and lowering liabilities for state and federal social welfare and social security programs, including state workers' compensation programs, SSDI, SSI, Medicare, and Medicaid.²⁸

Recommendation 20: Improve stay-at-work and return-to-work policies and programs for individuals who become ill or injured on the job.

Each year, 1,600 Alaskans experience new on-the-job injuries or illnesses that prevent them from working for at least 10 days, resulting to a referral to a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) or Certified Disability Management Specialist (CDMS) for evaluation. On average, only 6 to 10 of these individuals will develop a rehabilitation plan and receive retraining in order to return to work. While some others will return to work on their own, the majority will remain out of the work force due to the illness or injury. Alaska's Division of Workers' Compensation coordinates work-related medical, disability, and reemployment benefits.

Action Step 20a: Complete a thorough analysis of best practices in Workers Compensation Vocational Rehabilitation.

²⁸ 2016, Whitehouse, Ingram, and Silverstein: Work Matters: a Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities; <https://seed.csg.org/work-matters>





The Division of Workers' Compensation should hire a qualified consultant to evaluate reemployment benefit programs and return-to-work policies in other states and develop recommendations for improving Alaska's current system. Additional action steps can be identified based on the consultant's report.

Recommendation 21: Support and encourage teleworking where possible and desirable.

"Telework and working from home is not about working well; telework has also allowed people who have never been able to have a job to now have one; telework needs to continue post COVID since most of those people who are now contributing to society will lose that opportunity if it is removed and will go back to state and federal resources."²⁹

The number of Americans who telework was growing over the past two decades even before the acceleration brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, many employers — including state governments — are creating or revising telework policies and programs. At least 40 states have adopted public sector telework policies, and many state agencies have developed their own (either in place of or in addition to statewide policies).³⁰ These policies do not always adequately consider the needs of workers with disabilities. By ensuring that telework policies and programs are inclusive to all, employers can better accommodate a range of employee needs, work styles, and communication preferences; reduce operating costs by enabling more employees to work from home; and attract and retain a more diverse range of talent, particularly as inclusive telework policies are advertised.³¹ Working from home also reduces the impact of transportation issues which are particularly salient in Alaska.

One potential barrier to the expansion of telework in Alaska is that communities and individuals may have limited access to adequate Internet services. In addition, some teleworkers with disabilities may need accommodations provided by their employer in order to work from home, and employers may not be familiar with their obligations and options to provide those accommodations.

Although telework continues to be a core employment strategy for people with disabilities, some individuals may prefer to share a workplace with others rather than work at home in isolation. It is critical that policies regarding telework clearly state that individuals with disabilities should have full participation in telework decisions without others making assumptions that employees with disabilities should work from home rather than being included in the workplace.

Action Step 21a: Ensure that State policy guidance clearly states that telework can be justified as a reasonable accommodation under the ADA.

29 Travis Noah, AK Work Matters Task Force Member

30 National Conference of State Legislatures, The Promise of Telework; <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/the-promise-of-telework637471656.aspx>

31 Silverstein and Gurney, Council of State Governments: Disability-Inclusive Telework for States



Action Step 21b: Review HCBS waiver guidelines to ensure that supported employment services can be provided at home to support someone needing such services to telework.

Action Step 21c: Develop a disability inclusive telework guide (or identify an existing guide) to be made available to employers and employees with disabilities online.

For example: Adopting an Integrated Telework Policy for Employees with and without Disabilities from <https://AskEARN.org>

Recommendation 22: Invest in Post-COVID Health and Safety Planning.

The COVID-19 pandemic clarified that spending time in a workplace can be hazardous to the health of many individuals, and as workers return to places of business public and private employers alike are faced with the necessity of planning for the health and safety of their employees. A typical health and safety plan addresses:

- Management strategies (e.g., preparing a response plan, assigning a coordinator, training managers, establishing a communication system, and keeping records); and
- Strategies to prevent or reduce the transmission of the virus (e.g., screening, testing, contact tracing, quarantining, isolating, physical distancing, vaccinating, installing barriers, using face coverings, using personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfecting, and adopting return-to-the-workplace criteria).

A disability-inclusive COVID-19 health and safety plan also addresses protections that are aligned with the ADA and comparable state and local civil rights policies described in the first section of this framework. Topics addressed include:

- Protecting against discrimination on the basis of disability, including ensuring that employees are provided with reasonable accommodations.
- Protecting workers at higher risk for severe illness due to pre-existing health-related conditions.
- Ensuring confidentiality of information.
- Protecting against retaliation.³²

Mental health challenges have also increased throughout the pandemic and the current period of transition. According to a recent study (February 10, 2021) by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) titled, “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use,” throughout the pandemic people have experienced job or income loss, which has affected their mental health. Adults experiencing household job loss or lower income during the pandemic have consistently reported higher rates of symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder compared to adults not experiencing household job loss or income loss (53% vs. 32%, respectively). Essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as health care providers, grocery store employees, and mail and package delivery personnel, have shown high rates of poor mental health outcomes. The impact has been pronounced among the communities of color also experiencing disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Black and Hispanic adults have been more likely than white adults to report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder during the pandemic.

³² SEED COVID-19 Policy Collaborative, Frameworks for a Disability-Inclusive Recovery; and Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN); <https://askearn.org/page/health-and-safety-plans-for-covid-19-recovery>





Action Step 22a: Assist businesses in developing post-pandemic, disability-inclusive health/safety plans.

This service should be offered through the BEST teams, utilizing resources and examples that are readily available on the Internet.

Action Step 22b: Consider investing in expansion of Behavioral Health providers that provide employment.

This might take the form of short-term grants to enable agencies to restructure resources and focus on employment.

Recommendation 23: Support and expand the Senior Employment Initiative.

The Senior Employment Initiative is federally known as the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) and in Alaska called Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training, or MASST. By many measures, Alaska is the fastest aging state in the country³³, and the senior population is the fastest growing demographic in the state.³⁴

MASST provides subsidized, community service-based work experience for persons over 55 who have a family income of no more than 125% of the federal poverty level. Many of these individuals also experience disabilities. Participants are assigned to local nonprofit or public agencies, also called “host sites,” for an average of 20 hours per week at Alaska’s minimum or prevailing wage. The State and the US DOL subsidize these training wages. The dual goals of the program are to promote useful opportunities in community service activities and to move participants into unsubsidized employment to achieve economic self-sufficiency. The program’s greatest accomplishment is to give people a chance to work and to elevate their sense of dignity and self-worth by increasing one’s skills and abilities.

The MASST program has been administered by the Employment Security Division of Alaska DOLWD and is moving to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation as of July 1, 2022. This will allow a stronger focus on employment outcomes and better coordination of SCSEP and VR resources including training for new careers.

Action Step 23a: Develop a formalized process to coordinate DVR and MASST services for eligible seniors.

Some MASST participants are also eligible for DVR services and can be served jointly; for example, DVR funds can be used to fund training such as the basics of computer skills. The two programs share a goal of competitive integrated employment; however, the program requirements are different so services must be carefully coordinated and expenditures separately tracked.

Action Step 23b: Investigate whether a new certification program for seniors could be used to address the gap in demand for Personal Care Attendants.

33 Aging In Place, Where are the Fastest Aging Populations Around the World?; <https://aginginplace.org/fastest-aging-populations/>

34 Department of Health, Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) Senior Snapshot Older Alaskans in 2019/20; https://health.alaska.gov/acoa/documents/ACoA_SeniorSnapshot_Feb2021.pdf





Action Step 23c: Promote senior employment through providing training and marketing materials on employment services to Aging and Disability Resource Centers and Senior Centers Statewide.

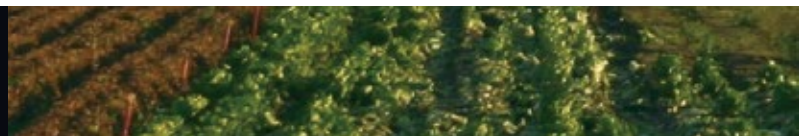
Effective examples can be found in other state systems.

Action Step 23d: Explore funding through the Mental Health Trust to establish grants to create employment specialist positions at regions that have a demonstrated need for senior employment services.

These individuals would work in partnership with MASST and DVR.

Action Step 23e: Formalize the use of a senior score card to measure overall performance in increasing employment outcomes for seniors.

This would require DETS and DVR to work together to address positive impacts, gaps in service, etc.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the [State Exchange on Employment & Disability \(SEED\)](#) is a unique collaboration that supports state and local governments in developing, adopting, and implementing disability-inclusive policies and best practices. Such policies lead to increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and a stronger, more inclusive American workforce and economy. SEED provided subject matter experts (particularly Bobby Silverstein and Katia Albanese), policy options, and state examples to help support the work of the Alaska Work Matters Task Force (Time Limited) to Improve Employment Opportunities and Outcomes for Individuals with Disabilities, which was directly informed by SEED’s [“Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities.”](#) SEED also assisted in the review and analysis of existing policies, practices, procedures, and workforce utilization data regarding the employment of people with disabilities in Alaska, and in the writing of the final report.

The Task Force Final Report and Executive Summary were prepared by Laurie Ford, M.S., an independent consultant, with the assistance of Michael Stevenson, Alaska Governor’s Committee.





APPENDIX A: TASK FORCE MEMBERS NAMES AND AFFILIATIONS 2021-2022

DOLWD: Department of Labor and Workforce Development
DOH: Department of Health

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DOLWD): Duane Mayes, Director
 Other DVR participants: Gina Bastian, Manager; Pam Kellish, Manager; Carol Polito, Counselor

Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education (DOH):
 Patrick Reinhart, Acting Executive Director. Other GCDSE participants: Michael Stevenson

Alaska Mental Health Board/Alaska Board for Alcohol & Drug Abuse (AMHB/ABADA), (DOH):
 Beverly Schoonover, Executive Director

Alaska Commission on Aging (ACOA), (DOH):
 Lisa Morley, Executive Director, replaced by Lesley Thompson

State Independent Living Council (SILC): Michael Christian, Executive Director

Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA): Jimael Johnson, Program Officer

Division of Employment & Training Services (DOLWD): Patsy Westcott, Director
 Other DETS participants: James Harvey, Operations Manager

Senior & Disabilities Services, (DOH): John Lee, Director
 Other SDS participants: Anthony Newman, Deputy Director

Division of Behavioral Health, (DOH): Gennifer Moreau, Director
 Other DBH participants: Beth Wilson, Social Services Program Officer

Department of Education & Early Development (DEED): Donald Enoch, Educational Administrator II

Department of Administration (DOA/HR): Kate Sheehan, Director

Department of Transportation: Robespierre Howard, Title VI Specialist and ADA Coordinator

Department of Corrections, Probation & Parole: Jennifer Winkelman, Director

Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC): Lara Loomis, Instructor

Kawarak Vocational Rehabilitation: Sara Lizak, Director

University of Alaska/Anchorage Center for Human Development: Karen Ward, Director

Beneficiaries:³⁵

Travis Noah, GCDSE	Sharon Clark, AMHB/ABADA
Bobby Dorton, AMHB/ABADA	Nona Safra, ACOA
Gulene Derty, Access Alaska	

Employers:

Alaska Communications: Rose Muncy, Program Manager/Talent Management/Affirmative Action EEO Coordinator

Matsu Regional Medical Center: Cathy Babuscio, Human Resources Director

Matanuska Electric Association: Shirley Akelkok, Recruiting & Workforce Development Program Manager

³⁵ This refers to individuals who receive services supported by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.





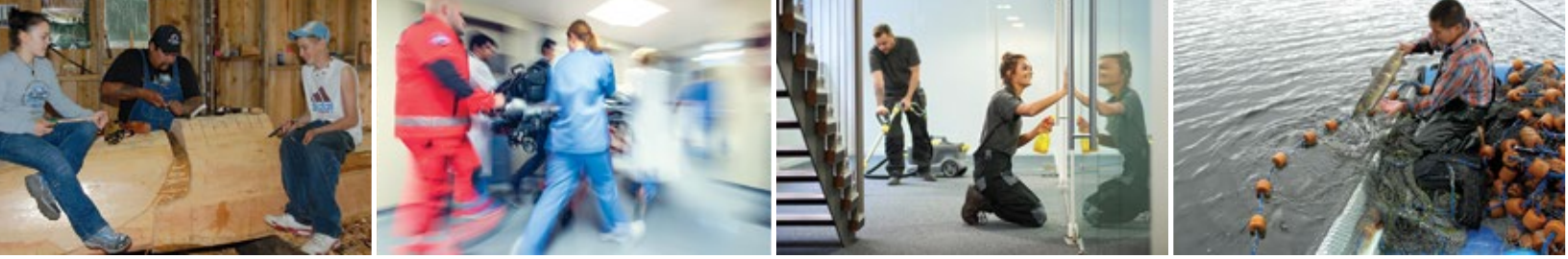
APPENDIX B: INDIVIDUAL PLACEMENT AND SUPPORT (IPS) MODEL

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an evidence-based supported employment model that helps people with mental health and substance use disorders find and keep jobs of their choosing. IPS is based on the philosophy that employment is treatment and leads to improved recovery outcomes. When working, people with mental health and substance use disorders feel better about themselves, and their job role improves their self-esteem and life satisfaction.

IPS is based on 8 principles: competitive employment, systematic job development, rapid job search, integrated services, worker preferences, zero exclusion, benefits planning, time-unlimited supports. Research shows that people in IPS attain employment faster, hold their jobs for longer, and work more hours. In 4 randomized controlled trials, over an 18-month period, approximately 3 times as many people receiving IPS services achieved employment and worked more hours, and people receiving IPS services worked overall four times as many hours compared to controls.³⁶

36 Individual Placement and Support, Employment Center; Evidence for IPS. <https://ipsworks.org/index.php/evidence-for-ips/>

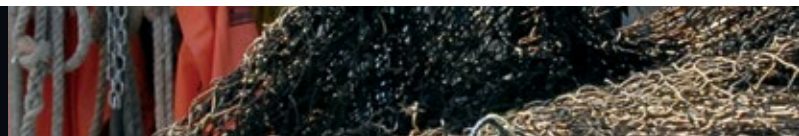




APPENDIX C: BACKGROUND ON ALASKA TRANSPORTATION

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities designs, constructs, operates and maintains the state's transportation infrastructure systems, buildings, and other facilities used by Alaskans and visitors. These include more than 5,600 miles of paved and gravel highways; 237 airports; 839 bridges; over 800 public facilities; 16 harbors; and a ferry system covering 3,500 nautical miles serving 33 coastal communities. Other infrastructure elements are built and maintained by local entities – cities, for example. Still others, like rideshare services, are privately owned though functioning as a public resource.

In 2012, the Alaska Legislature established a 13-member Community & Public Transportation Advisory Board within the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities. The Board was charged with preparing a strategic plan that included the mission, objectives, initiatives, and performance goals for coordinated and community transportation in the state and performing other tasks related to improving agency coordination and combining of services to achieve cost savings in the funding and delivery of community and public transportation services. The Board published and emphasized their Interagency Coordination Recommendation with the following objectives: 1) Establish a culture of coordination across all state agencies; 2) Establish shared expectations and consistent coordination practices at a state and local level; 3) Provide for consistent data and data sets that support informed decision-making to optimize funding while streamlining state agency reporting requirements. However, once the enabling law sunset in 2016 and a new Governor came in, these Board recommendations were largely ignored.







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DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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