



Employment for Individuals with Disabilities

The Industry Position of the Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities

Industry Statement

Florida ARF is committed to working with member agencies who provide employment related services and supports to ensure that Florida's service system provides individual client choice, is robust, and is responsive to the needs of individuals with disabilities. We believe individuals with disabilities must have the same opportunities that others can access to participate and succeed in meaningful work, to earn competitive wages and benefits, and to receive the supports and services that will allow them to reach their employment goals.

While many individuals with disabilities desire to be employed, they are the most seriously unemployed of all groups throughout the nation and in Florida. Individuals with disabilities experience significant disparities in employment and participation in the labor force. This is true in good and bad economic times.

US Department of Labor data indicate that 17.9 percent of individuals who had a disability were employed in Florida in 2016, while over 65 percent of those who did not have a disability were employed. These numbers indicate that individuals with disabilities face real barriers that negatively impact their ability to compete for jobs.

As an industry of committed professionals, Florida ARF and its member agencies initiate and respond to changes in public policy that impacts individuals with disabilities. Florida ARF member agencies welcome innovation and have demonstrated the capacity to respond to changing environments.

Principles

The Florida ARF member agencies who are Community Rehabilitation Providers are committed to the continuous refinement and redesign of Florida's employment services network to ensure positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities consistent with their abilities and chosen paths. We know that:

- **Individuals must have choice in their selection of employment options based on their personal desires and needs.**

Florida ARF and its member agencies support public policy that directs more individuals with disabilities to competitive employment opportunities. We value person-centered planning and strategies that assist individuals with disabilities in achieving a meaningful, involved, self-sufficient life. We also understand a variety of quality services and supports must exist within a service delivery system if it is to be responsive to the needs of individuals with all types and severity of disabilities.

- **Individuals and their families must have access to reliable and accurate information about services and supports as well as expected outcomes.**

Families and individuals need to know how to access services, they need to have accurate and understandable information about the impact of employment relative to other individual benefits such as healthcare and social security, and they must also have choices regarding the services and supports that are available. Stakeholders must be united in communicating such information.

- **Florida ARF members and other Community Rehabilitation Providers serve as the backbone of Florida's service system - they must exist to provide quality employment-related services and supports for those who want to work.**

Member agencies provide services and supports for individuals with disabilities in a variety of work experiences including: Competitive employment, supported employment, transitional work, On-the-Job training, extended work environments, self-employment endeavors, and facility-based centers. They offer an array of supports in these settings including Discovery, training, job coaching, work readiness, job carving, supervision, and other assistance to employers to ensure employment successes.

Florida ARF members and other Community Rehabilitation Providers follow industry standards and requirements that ensure high quality services. Collectively, the Florida ARF member agencies offer a full array of services and supports that meet individuals' needs and desires for employment, and a safety net when needed.

Member agencies partner and work collaboratively with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Agency for People with Disabilities, the Department of Economic Opportunity, the Department of Management Services, and other entities such as the Able Trust. We continuously seek to refine and develop new and innovative models to promote choice options that meet the unique employment needs of the individuals served.

- **Florida ARF members and other Community Rehabilitation Providers are responsive and oftentimes are leaders in implementing new public policy trends and changes that better serve the needs of individuals with disabilities who seek employment.**

- They have successfully responded to employment-related, service model changes resulting from key legislation such as the rewrite of the 2014 Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA).
- They have responded to Home and Community Based Setting rule amendments that stress shifting individuals in day activity programs to supportive and/or competitive community services, and they have responded to shifts in service priorities such as more emphasis on serving youth.
- They have seen numerous proposed changes to federal employment-related laws that affect services for individuals with disabilities including the Randolph-Sheppard Act; the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act; and, Department of Labor Wage and Hour laws. When public policy changes have been positive for individuals with disabilities, provider agencies have adopted the concepts wholeheartedly; when proposed changes were not

considered to be in the best interest of individuals served, they have advocated against such.

- They have seen revised Vocational Rehabilitation regulations restricting placement choices and frequent proposed laws and regulations that limit use of wages based on productivity levels. Again, they have questioned if the changes were in the best interest of those who were receiving the services.
- They have experienced Order of Selection, wait lists, and budget surpluses and deficits. Through it all, they have remained resilient and clients have received quality services.
- **To remain relevant, Florida ARF members and other Community Rehabilitation Providers have invested time and money, pursued new service models, restructured their programs, and retrained their staff.**
 - They have faced multiple challenges and have responded in a resilient manner.
 - They have consistently supported policy changes that reduce barriers and eliminate disincentives that adversely affect individuals with disabilities who seek employment.
 - They have been vocal in advocating and expressing their concerns when the proposed changes were not considered to be conducive to assisting individuals with achievement of their employment goals.

Florida ARF members and other Community Rehabilitation Providers know public policy barriers exist that need resolution before many individuals with disabilities can realize their employment goals. Some of these include:

- Change is needed within the eligibility requirements for Medicaid and SSI/SSDI that do not force individuals to choose between entitlement program-sponsored health benefits and those offered via employment. Florida needs to pursue the Medicaid Buy In/Working People with Disabilities initiative (MB/WPI).
- More options and resources are needed for transportation services and supports that will assist individuals with achievement of their employment goals. One of the most significant employment barriers many individuals with disabilities face is the lack of accessible and reliable transportation, as well as availability of transportation when work happens. A 2017 Florida workgroup reviewed this dilemma and some resources were approved by the 2018 legislature to further review the concerns. Immediate action is needed!
- Businesses need additional incentives to encourage the growth of a more inclusive workforce throughout the state. Passage of the 2018 Worker's Compensation Bill is an example of the type effort needed – with the passage of this bill, VR or Blind Services clients participating in an adult or youth work experience activity are deemed employees of the state for purposes of workers' compensation coverage.
- More collaborative partnerships are needed between state and local agencies, community rehabilitation providers, and private industry to develop effective and efficient occupationally oriented resources for individuals with disabilities. The partnerships

should include local Community Development Boards, the Department of Education, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Economic Opportunity, and multiple community stakeholders. Florida's Employment 1st initiative, of which Florida ARF is a member, is a potential leader in this regard.

- Expedited referrals for employment-related services from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation are needed to ensure that individuals with disabilities who seek employment receive services and supports in a timely manner.
- All persons involved in the person's life must be encouraged to promote personal involvement of individuals with disabilities in the planning and realization of supports that are necessary for achievement of individuals' personal employment goals.
- Meaningful job readiness activities that promote job training and preparation for those who are not already employment-ready should be prioritized. These programs should include opportunities and options that allow persons involved to earn income.
- Job readiness should occur in the most integrated community environment, and can occur in a variety of work models such as:
 - competitive community employment,
 - supported employment,
 - transitional work situations,
 - industry-based settings,
 - training sites,
 - extended work environment,
 - job crews,
 - self-employment, and
 - facility-based sites.

Collectively, these models represent environments that can meet the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, all of whom are entitled to the freedom and dignity to choose the option that is most appropriate to their needs.

Conclusion

As employment related service models change to meet new expectations, there must be a mutual partnership evidenced by the desire of all parties to ensure that needed resources are available to ensure sustained success for individuals with disabilities who seek employment options. Florida ARF and its member agencies are excited about the future of employment in Florida and seek to collaborate with all involved entities to ensure that future trends, changes, and resources are responsive to the needs of the individuals we serve.