



## Employment First

Linda Litzinger, Staff

If you wish to assist with Legislative Reform regarding employment options for persons with disabilities, please read on.

A recent study shows that people with disabilities who have achieved fully-integrated employment in their community find themselves to be healthier, safer and happier. They form relationships with co-workers, have fewer health issues, find an increased sense of well-being, and increase their feelings of competence and self-worth. Texas is thus developing a program called Employment First.

Employment First places an emphasis on becoming fully integrated in a job or volunteer position of your choosing. Using supported employment professionals, you experience full immersion in the workplace of your choice, as an alternative to the existing model where a group home transports everyone to the same segregated worksite.

In July, our federal government published rules for the “Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act” or WIOA, and coincidentally Disability Rights–Texas authored a paper titled “Living on a Dime and Left Behind.” This paper reveals that 10,000 Texans are employed at less than minimum wage in sheltered workshops, where 58% earn less than 50c/hour, and 25% have their employer as their representative payee.

WIOA is designed to strengthen and improve our nation’s public workforce system, preparing and placing Americans with significant barriers to employment, including significant disabilities, into high-quality jobs and careers. Career preparation shall begin early (age 10 for blindness; age 14 for the remaining population with disability), in order to prevent placing graduating students in sub-minimum-wage sheltered workshops. At least 15% of the Vocational Rehabilitation allotment must be spent on pre-employment transition services. WIOA calls for a unified state plan, with coordination and reporting requirements among educators, vocational rehabilitation and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). It strengthens federal guidelines for states, school districts, and employers to fully integrate people with disabilities in the workplace, offering additional supports.

## Texas Parent to Parent

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Legislators are thus writing bills for the upcoming session to be better aligned with new federal requirements, to gradually phase out sheltered workshops, to ensure that existing day habilitation centers register and be regulated, and to add more options and supports to help people to prepare for integrated employment. If you wish to help address this policy reform, from any viewpoint, please do not hesitate to contact Linda Litzinger at [linda.litzinger@txp2p.org](mailto:linda.litzinger@txp2p.org) or 512-922-3810.

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