

2025 Expect Employment

Report to the Governor

A New Era of Challenges & Solutions

Executive Summary

The Expect Employment Report is a comprehensive presentation of the initiatives, efforts and work completed by state agencies and community partners that make up the Employment First Task Force. This year, we are publishing the 12th annual report.

The disability employment gap continues to shrink, but there is no shortage of work to be done. With the creation of the Department of Disability and Aging in July 2024, the Employment First Task Force was charged with the responsibility of insuring competitive and integrative work not just for Tennesseans with disabilities, but also the growing older adult population. Aging adults are no stranger to challenges in the workplace, much like the disabled population. Young or old, neurotypical or neurodivergent, individuals in substance abuse recovery or facing a behavioral health diagnosis – Tennesseans want to work. These Tennesseans want to find jobs they love, jobs that serve them and the community, jobs that further cement the vital role they play in building economies in small towns and big cities. The Employment First Task Force is looking at state agencies, community partners and advocacy groups to find innovative ways to improve service delivery, increase access to technology, and communicate the important message of the value of disability employment to both the employers and the workforce as a whole.

With this report, we share the final findings as they relate to the 2021- 2024 Strategic Plan. The new Strategic Plan, created by the Employment First Task Force, is tackling real-life employment problems with viable solutions. It challenges the expansion of successful employment programs to all 95 counties and pushes for improved access to reliable transportation for those commuting to and from work. The Task Force is excited to see how these updated goals help agencies and advocates identify new challenges and solutions as we work to close the employment gap and help individuals find success in the workforce.

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Partner Agencies

Department of
Disability & Aging

Department of
**Labor & Workforce
Development**

Department of
Human Services

Department of
Education

Division of
TennCare

Department of
**Mental Health &
Substance Abuse Services**

Department of
Human Resources

Department of
**Economic &
Community Development**

Department of
Health

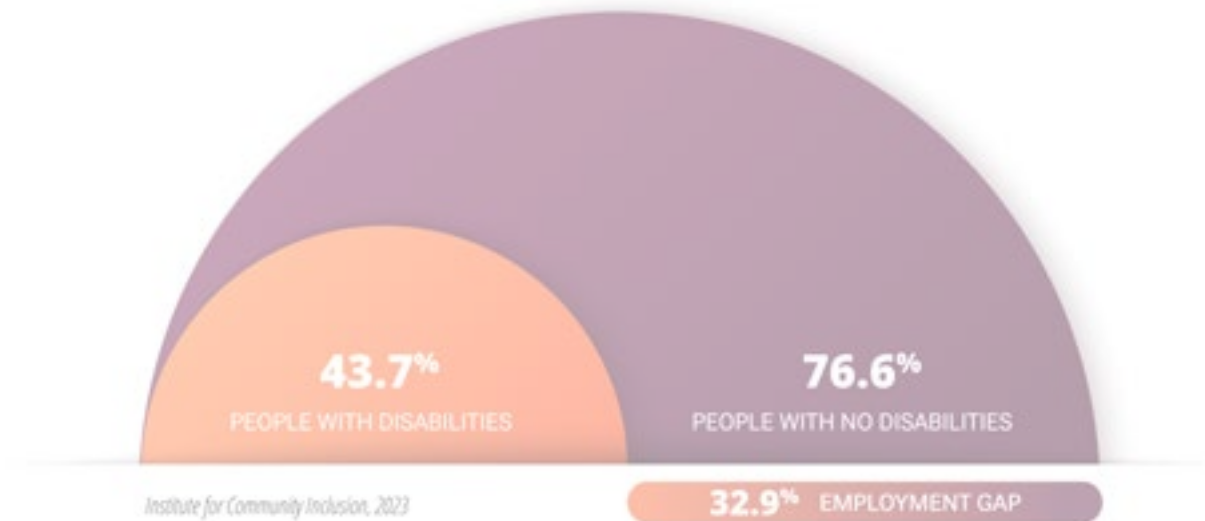
Council on
Developmental Disabilities



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CLOSING THE TENNESSEE EMPLOYMENT GAP BETWEEN PEOPLE WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES BY 5% BY 2028

Current Employment Gap



What have we done?

In 2012, the newly formed TennesseeWorks Partnership brought together people with disabilities, families, community agencies, state government, employers, and community leaders to build programs and develop policies promoting employment for people with disabilities. By Executive Order, the Governor's Employment First Task Force was established in 2013. Working together, members of TennesseeWorks and the Employment First Task Force have moved Tennessee forward in the following areas:

1. Formed statewide partnerships between **more than 40 organizations**.
2. Developed five task force subgroups focused on **service alignment, technology and innovation, employers, community awareness, and student transition**.
3. Formed statewide partnerships between **more than 40 organizations**.

What are we doing to close the employment gap by another 5%?

To close the employment gap by an additional 5%, members of TennesseeWorks and the Employment First Task Force continue to work collaboratively to ensure services and supports are based on the needs of the disability community and that supports and services are comprehensive and consider the whole person.

2022 | 2024

Final Year of Strategic Plan

As the landscape of disability employment continues to change, so do the goals, expectations, and strategies we as a community rely on to further success. 2024 marked the final year of the 2022 – 2024 Employment First Task Force Strategic Plan. Through the goals of service alignment, technology and innovation, employers, community awareness, and student transition, the Employment First Task Force worked to create and expand employment opportunities for all Tennesseans with disabilities. As agencies, advocates, and community organizations move forward, the vision remains rooted in access to competitive and integrative employment opportunities for people with disabilities; but now with updated goals.

Service Alignment

Successful service alignment means that systems are coordinated and delivered in a seamless manner and are able to directly benefit the individuals served. For the Department of Human Services and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Team, a new online referral option for customers/families/advocates to use helps them connect with VR about services. This allows individuals to initiate engagement with VR and process referrals more efficiently. By having this option, partners such as TennCare and Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services can have their providers submit the names of customers wanting to apply for services, with the goal of receiving a return call within approximately 24-business hours. Rapid engagement allows for individuals to start the process of achieving their career goals. From State Fiscal Year 2023 to State Fiscal Year 2025 (07/01/2022 - 05/31/2025), Vocational Rehabilitation increased referrals to the program by 77%. They also saw an increase in the number of Individual Plans for Employment developed for Vocational Rehabilitation customers. From State Fiscal Year 2023 to State Fiscal Year 2025 (07/01/2022 - 05/31/2025), Vocational Rehabilitation observed an increase in the number of new Individual Plans for Employment developed for Vocational Rehabilitation customers by 42%.

Vocational Rehabilitation will continue to discuss options for having a universal application and/or disability determination document to allow for a more seamless process for Tennesseans with disabilities to connect with services across various state agencies. This will ensure the needs of individuals with disabilities are included across all state agencies to allow for full inclusion.

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has reported a 24% increase in Individual Placement and Support (IPS) applications, compared to FY23. More than one thousand Tennesseans with a mental health diagnosis were supported by the Individualized Placement and Support (IPS) program in 2024, and the department has more than 1,700 targeted supports for FY25. IPS is available in 46 counties, but TDMHSAS is still working to expand to all 95 Tennessee counties.

TennCare has achieved its goal of service alignment success with streamlined training requirements. For the state's long-term services and supports programs for older adults, people with intellectual, developmental and/or physical disabilities, Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES, CHOICES, and the 1915(c) waivers, provider employment staff will now have one consolidated training requirements protocol that outlines expectations for each program. Across all programs, employment staff training requirements are significantly more aligned, greatly reducing the time and financial burden on providers and their staff. There are also new opportunities to provide supports for individuals who are self-employed. Previously, self-employment supports were only available through ECF CHOICES and, as of 2020, through the 1915(c) waivers. However, employment services - including self-employment - are now available under CHOICES, a program designed for older adults and people with physical disabilities. Existing ECF CHOICES Self-Employment services have been significantly enhanced to include a plethora of resources, guidance, and tools for both the provider and individuals interested in or pursuing self-employment. The enhanced self-employment services have been added to all Home and Community Based (HCBS) programs, including CHOICES, ECF CHOICES, and the 1915(c) waivers. There are three self-employment services available to individuals enrolled in these programs: Exploration, Plan, and Start-Up. A transportation benefit was also added to the CHOICES program with the roll-out of employment services. This addition to the CHOICES program was originally funded under the state's approved HCBS Spending Plan under Section 9817 of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) but received continued funding in the FY26 budget.

Reclaiming Life with Vocational Rehabilitation

When Kevin Polk came to the Division of Rehabilitation Services, he'd faced no shortage of challenges. After a spinal cord injury meant the end of his college scholarship, Polk was determined to maintain his independence while navigating a brand-new life in a wheelchair. With no family support and no income, Kevin, completed a self-referral to the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program – a decision that marked the beginning of a journey that would transform his life.

The VR team worked to create an individualized plan for Kevin that was tailored to his needs. VR Staff connected him with job leads and offered guidance. One of those leads—a role as an emergency roadside responder with AAA—would change everything.

Vocational Rehabilitation met Kevin's needs beyond employment – from transportation to housing. While Kevin worked at AAA, VR remained in place, helping him navigate the transition and stay stable in his role. Kevin has since been promoted and now works directly with companies subscribed to AAA's services. He's also taken impressive steps toward greater independence. He saved enough to buy a truck and installed modifications using affordable parts from eBay.

With the right support and services, Kevin is thriving and has his sights on his next goal: becoming a motivational speaker. Kevin's story is one of resilience, determination, and the life-changing impact of Tennessee's Division of Rehabilitation Services.



“VR has been a crucial point in turning the tide between being successful and being homeless,” Kevin says. “Without them, I wouldn’t have goals — or a way to achieve them.”

Adrian Baldizon, an IPS Success Story

After connecting with CMI Healthcare Services in Memphis at the suggestion of a friend, Adrian Baldizon went from living one day at a time to living his best life. Even with a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering, Adrian was struggling to find his place in the workforce.

With housing supports and supported employment services through the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program, Adrian made a job match that met his immediate needs. But Adrian kept working hard to find employment that he was passionate about. With the support of his IPS Employment Specialist Zephora Walker, Adrian found a job that matched his education, skills, and desires.

Now, Adrian works at Memphis Light, Gas, and Water as an Energy Consultant, directly serving customers and managing home energy use levels. Adrian's work allows him to help customers of all income levels conserve energy and understand the MLGW billing process, while staying happy and healthy in their homes year-round.



Technology & Innovation

Technology and innovation are vital to the Employment First movement. Fresh ideas, new equipment, and innovative solutions will solve problems that otherwise made it easy for the larger population to ignore the role of individuals with disabilities in the workplace.

More efforts are being made by TennCare to financially support Enabling Technology efforts. TennCare has added Enabling Technology to CHOICES as a covered benefit for individuals enrolled in CHOICES Groups 2 and 3. Enabling Technology in CHOICES has been approved to remain as a covered benefit and was included in the FY 2026 approved budget.

The DDA 1915c waiver for Enabling Technology services has seen a 46% increase in the last year, with more than 800 Tennesseans utilizing Enabling Technology services. There has also been a 19% increase in Enabling Technology rReferrals within the 1915c waiver.

As of June 2025, there are 369 people in ECF CHOICES and 844 people in CHOICES, for a total of 1,213 people approved and using Enabling Technology services, which is an 80.5% increase from June 2024.

The Tennessee Tech Connect program has more than 1,600 users in Tennessee and the United States, with more than 1,913 sessions and well over 4,000 views.

The Medicaid Alternative Pathways to Independence (MAP) program achieved transformative growth in FY2025, significantly expanding its reach and impact across all service regions and areas of the State of Tennessee. Participant enrollment surged by 38% (from 233 FY24 to 321 FY25). Totaling enrollment for the MAPs program of 723. MAPs providers have successfully validated over 600+ total milestones and nearly 250 Virtual Community Resource Maps (VCRM's). The continued growth was managed by increasing the MAPs provider network by 46.7%.

In July 2024, Vocational Rehabilitation made changes to policy to allow for more VR customers to be able to receive assistive technology (enabling technology) services when needed to achieve their individualized career goals. This has included technology in the category of telecommunications, sensory and other technological aids and devices. Additionally, VR is able to meet the needs of customers requiring assistive technology at any level in order to participate in training and achieve success with employment. The number of customers receiving assistive technology devices increased by 113%. Vocational Rehabilitation continues to educate individuals and employers about the benefits of enabling technology to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving and maintaining employment for greater independence.

Lorena's Success with MAPs

Lorena Kasper is living the independent life she always dreamed of thanks, in part, to the support of the Medicaid Alternative Pathways to Independence (MAPs) Program.

After moving from Oregon to Tennessee to be closer to family, Lorena was introduced to MAPs, which quickly became a cornerstone in her journey toward stability and independence.

With help from MAPs, Lorena overcame numerous challenges and secured permanent housing. She now has her own bedroom in a supportive group home where she enjoys cooking, socializing with housemates, and the freedom to come and go as she pleases. For Lorena, finding a place to call home was only the beginning. She was determined to return to work.

When she first arrived in Tennessee, she worked one day a week at her sister's realty company, but Lorena had the drive to do more. Building on her nearly two decades of experience, she applied and was hired at a local McDonald's.

"I got almost 18 and a half years experience working at McDonald's," said Lorena. "MAPs is the one that got me the job at McDonald's, I'm staying there, staying there until I'm 80 years old."

MAPs not only supported Lorena's employment goals, but also provided transportation assistance. Through the program, Lorena uses Lyft to get rides to and from work.

"This is what she wanted to do. That's the main thing, that these are the things she wanted for herself," said Candus Jones, MAPs Coordinator.

Thanks to MAPs-provided technology, Lorena also takes the Lyft to the Clarksville Ajax Turner 50+ Center. There, she enjoys bingo and belly dancing. The center has helped her get involved in the community and make lifelong friends.

"It's just amazing to see her build those community connections, to foster them on her own," said Jones.

As Lorena continues to thrive, her story serves as an example of how the right support can help any individual achieve their goals.





East TN Power Up! Technology Camp

DDA hosted another wonderful Power Up Technology Camp in East Tennessee in May, 2025. Campers were able to enjoy the great outdoors while also exploring the latest and greatest enabling technology!

This year, during the 2-day Tech Camp, DDA had a total of **174 participants** that included **94 campers, 17 family members of campers, 45 provider support staff, and 18 technology vendor staff participants.**

SHIFT Technology First Education and Accreditation

TN DDA's Division of Program Innovation and SHIFT partnered once again to provide scholarships for Technology First Education and Accreditation. This marked the fifth year of a collaboration to advance Tennessee's commitment to a Technology First approach, and **13 organizations** were awarded Technology First Accreditation through the program.

Tennessee **now has a total of 21 organizations** across the state that have received accreditation as a Technology First Organization through Shift. Furthermore, **an additional 41 service coordination staff were awarded scholarships** to earn a SHIFT Enabling Technology Navigator (ETN) Certification.

Employers

To create a competitive and integrated workforce, there must be available workplaces. Across the state of Tennessee, businesses have taken the first steps in connecting individuals with disabilities to vital jobs within their community.

Department of Human Resources (DOHR) oversees the State as a Model Employer (SAME) Internship Program. This partnership is between DOHR, DHS -Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and state agencies. Students from the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC), Smyrna, are matched in their areas of study to an internship opportunity within a state agency. Students can intern for 6 weeks during the spring, summer, and fall. Students can gain on-the-job learning opportunities, and it also gives employers access to a pool of new and emerging talent. The pilot program was launched in Spring 2023 with one student at the Department of Safety's Springfield Driver Service Center. Since then, they have hosted over 17 interns in 3 different agencies, across TN (Chattanooga, Knoxville, Byrdstown, Murfreesboro, Alcoa, Jackson, Paris, Tullahoma, and Nashville).

DOHR held its 3rd Annual Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) Event in partnership with TRC Smyrna and other state agencies. The in-person event was held on October 22, and 136 attendees and nine departments (F&A, DDA, Treasury, DOHR, Safety, TennCare, DHS, DGS, and Health) participated. The virtual event was held on October 30 with 30 attendees, and three agencies (DOHR, TDEC, and DDA) participated. The event was not only a time for attendees to learn about opportunities within TN State Government, but agency representatives also got to interact more and meet students through the Reverse Career Fair and Mock Interview Clinic.

VR has increased the number of VR customers exiting with competitive integrated employment in their desired career fields over the last three years. Throughout this year, VR continued to offer Windmills Training to employers. The VR Business Services Team delivered Windmills training through targeted lunch and learn sessions and upon request to individual employers. This training is designed to challenge and change attitudes and misconceptions about disability in the workplace, helping employers foster more inclusive and equitable hiring practices.

Last year, DOHR recognized the second annual TN Employment First Inclusive Employer Award. As part of a workgroup within the Employment First Task Force, the TN Employment First Inclusive Employer Award was born. This award, first implemented in 2023, seeks to recognize businesses that go above and beyond the legal requirements to recruit, hire, advance, and retain people with disabilities. Categories include businesses within the community as well as state agencies. Three state agencies and 14 businesses were awarded in 2024. The goal is to continue increasing the number of employers recognized each year.



“Everybody leaves smiling when they talk to Levi”

Levi’s Success at Stockdale’s, National Disability Employment Awareness Month

Levi Armstrong knows what makes him a great employee: his desire to help people. It made him an ideal hire for the Stockdale’s in Paris, Tennessee.

“Everybody leaves smiling when they talk to Levi,” said Halie Steward, the store Manager and Levi’s supervisor. “He is hardworking. He wants to help everybody there is.”

To recognize National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October 2024, the Department of Disability and Aging highlighted disability employment stories across the Volunteer State. The department believes no matter your age or ability, Tennesseans have something incredible to add to the workplace and community.

Vocational Rehabilitation Training Coordinator Nicole Briley-Earp has cultivated relationships with local businesses to promote disability hiring. She helped forge the connection for Levi, who works loading feed, organizing inventory and directly serving customers.

“Every person has a purpose. For me, it’s getting to meet a person, finding their strengths and then connecting that to something,” said Briley-Earp. “This is an awesome person that you should have the opportunity to get to know.”





Muse Knoxville, TEFIE 2024 Winner

In 2024, DOHR awarded Muse Knoxville with a Tennessee Employment First Inclusive Employer Award. Muse Knoxville is a children's science museum dedicated to inspiring and empowering young minds through hands-on, STEM-based learning experiences. Dedicated to accessibility on behalf of guests and employees, DOHR recognized Muse for their inclusive hiring practices and equitable workplace culture. 27.6% of Muse Knoxville staff self-identify as disabled, and work in various roles ranging from part time entry-level to full time leadership roles. In a partnership with local organizations who provide job training and skills development for people with disabilities, including Knox County Schools, UT Futures and Sertoma of Knoxville, the museum created the Muse Ambassadors program: a skills-based workforce development initiative for high school and postsecondary students with disabilities. Ambassadors report to the Museum Equity Manager, who creates individualized skill development plans and tracks for each ambassador based on their goals and needs. Ambassadors engage in meaningful roles such as guest engagement, exhibit upkeep, and programming support, all while gaining soft skills such as communication, responsibility, and workplace etiquette. Ambassadors are also provided with job coaching and individualized check-ins for continued growth.



#HireMyStrengths Campaign

In honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the Department of Disability and Aging participates in the #HireMyStrengths campaign. With programming in person and on agency social media platforms, DDA encourages all participants to share their personal strengths and the value they add to an employment environment.

Community Awareness

For the Employment First mission to succeed across the Volunteer State, in communities from Memphis to Mountain City, employers, citizens, and partner organizations alike must believe in the right to integrated and competitive employment. They must be educated and committed to the idea that regardless of age or ability, Tennesseans have the right to work a job they love.

Our Place Nashville, an organization outside of the State Government, is focused on the relationship between employment and inclusive independent housing. The model utilized by Our Place Nashville requires residents to work or volunteer at least part time. They've found that when individuals with IDD can work jobs they enjoy, they're more likely to succeed in the community. The employment rate has consistently stayed above 90% for those living at Our Place Nashville. The Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee is a member of several chambers throughout Middle TN. Through these community connections, they share information about employment success, the center for decision making support, and host workshops on ABLE accounts and other ways to build employment success.

In 2023, VR began hosting "Job Clubs" each month where VR customers, community rehabilitation providers (CRPs), and employers come together to share about job openings, assist VR customers in applying for jobs, conduct interviews, and much more. VR hosts these at multiple locations within the community, such as the American Job Centers (AJCs). VR has expanded IPS into additional counties, now servicing 2/3 of the state. In collaboration with Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, they have been able to reach numerous Tennesseans with Mental Health diagnosis and support them in the journey of employment.

As a longstanding community partner in Tennessee's Disability Services Network, the Tennessee Disability Pathfinder (Pathfinder) has continuously sought innovative ways to empower individuals with disabilities through information sharing and access to resources. In alignment with the goals of the Employment First Task Force and the newly established Department of Disability and Aging, Pathfinder has taken tangible steps to increase access to employment and support individuals with disabilities in achieving meaningful work.

In 2024, Pathfinder introduced a Disability Employment section, EmployAbility*, in its statewide newsletter, The Compass, offering curated information on employment opportunities, mentorship programs, volunteer roles, job fairs, and community-based resources. While direct impact data is still being collected, early indicators show promise: newsletter readership has increased by 15%, and 25% of total engagement is tied specifically to this new employment-focused content. This highlights the increasing demand for disability employment information and underscores Pathfinder's crucial role in meeting that need.

Each year since 2021, we have dedicated our October newsletter to advancing access to disability employment resources, curating in-depth stories, resource information, and event listings that directly support Tennesseans with disabilities on their employment journeys. This focused issue underscores our ongoing commitment to breaking down barriers and ensuring that every individual can connect with opportunities and support.

Internally, Pathfinder also leads by example. Of its current team of 9 members, 33.3% (3 out of 9) are individuals with disabilities, and an additional 22% (2 out of 9) are caregivers of people with

disabilities. This not only reflects Pathfinder's values but underscores the organization's belief that representation is fundamental to advocacy. We are who we represent.

There is still a certain stigma that surrounds hiring individuals with disabilities, but as the Employment First efforts work to educate the community and employers, more and more spaces and places are opening their doors to the value these individuals bring to organizations if given the opportunity and proper supports.

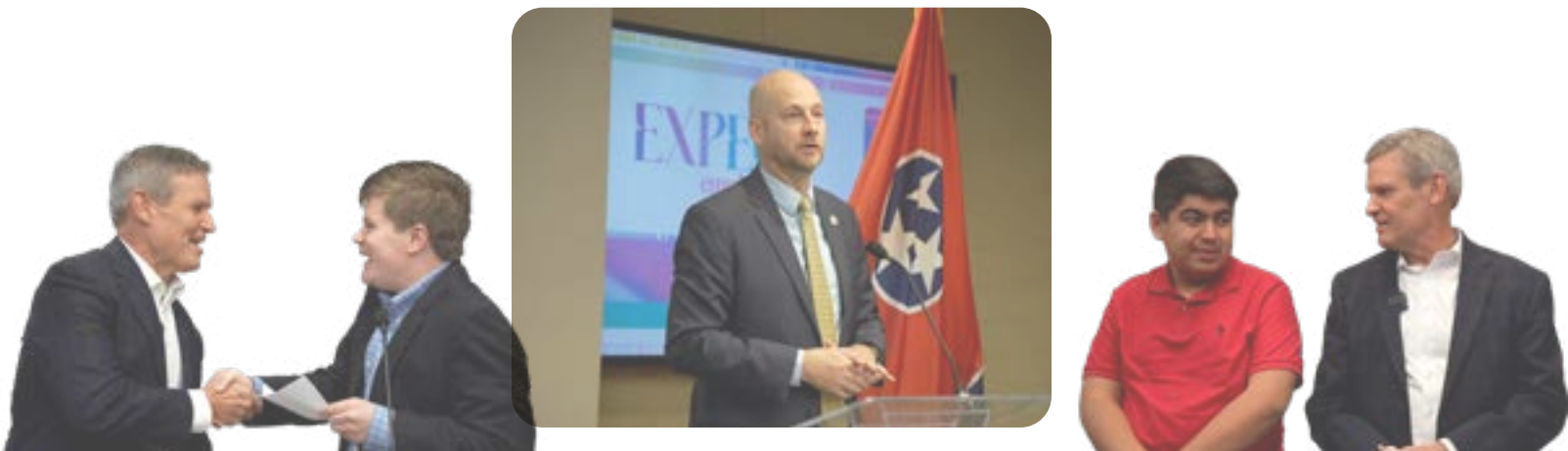
The Next Decade of Disability Employment

The Department of Disability and Aging alongside the Employment First Task Force presented Governor Bill Lee with the 2024 Expect Employment Report in December 2024 at Lipscomb University. Students enrolled in the Lipscomb IDEAL Program met with the Governor and shared their experiences participating in inclusive postsecondary education program. Lipscomb's IDEAL Program provides opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to experience on-campus life, attend college classes, and complete internships to develop job skills. "I am deeply committed to ensuring that every Tennessean has access to meaningful employment, including people with disabilities," said Gov. Bill Lee. "The work our colleges and universities are doing through higher education programs like Lipscomb IDEAL are helping prepare students with disabilities for employment and empowering them to contribute their talents to Tennessee's workforce."

DDA Commissioner Brad Turner shared highlights of the 2024 Expect Employment report with participating agencies, community advocates, and education leaders. Highlights included:

- A 48% increase in the number of people with disabilities using enabling technology to increase their independence. Enabling Technology can help people on the job by providing task reminders without the assistance of an in-person job coach.
- Rapid growth in the Medicaid Alternative Pathways to Independence (MAPs) Program, which provides transition-aged students and young adults with the tools they need to live, work and travel independently.
- Establishing the Employment First Inclusive Employer Award, to recognize businesses across the state who are dedicated to recruiting, hiring, and advancing people with disabilities. Six businesses and four state agencies received the award in 2023.

"The next ten years provides opportunities to build upon that foundation, by continuing to increase access to technology and continuing to educate our employers about why Employment First matters," said Department of Disability and Aging Commissioner Brad Turner.



Student Transition

The transition from high school to adulthood presents challenges for all families, whether their youth are neurotypical or neurodivergent. For Tennessee students with disabilities, access to strong transition programming significantly increases their chances of long-term success.

Transition Tennessee, was developed in collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Education and the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) at the Tennessee Department of Human Services. TransitionTN equips transition professionals to support students with disabilities in preparing for life after high school, including pathways to competitive integrated employment. The platform offers robust resources for special educators, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) providers, school and district leaders, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) staff, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers. Signs of success include more than 50 in-person and virtual training events, three annual transition academies, eight new student-facing courses, and expanded access to plain language tip sheets for families.

The transition period from high school age student to working adult comes with challenges for any family, whether neurotypical or neurodivergent. When Tennessee students with disabilities preparing to enter the workforce are met the right transition programming, they're more likely to succeed.

Transition Tennessee is focused on preparing transition professionals to support students with disabilities for life after high school, including competitive integrated employment. Transition Tennessee has developed transition-focused resources for transition professionals including special educators, Pre-ETS providers, school and district leaders, VR leadership, and CTE teachers. Signs of success for the Transition Tennessee team include over 50 in-person and virtual training events, 3 annual transition academies for professionals, 8 new courses for students and improved access to plain language tip sheets for families.

Opportunities for Continued Growth

The workgroup has identified the following priorities to further strengthen transition supports:

1. Provide targeted transition training and resources for administrators and district leaders (e.g., superintendents, supervisors, and district leaders).
2. Finalize an interactive graphic that illustrates how each organization supports students as they enter adulthood.
3. Expand district awareness of and connections to agencies serving students and young adults with disabilities to improve information sharing and family engagement.
4. Continue supporting school-based professionals (such as special educators and CTE teachers) and Pre-ETS providers with focused trainings and tools. Pre- and post-training surveys will be used to assess effectiveness.
5. Increase awareness and use of Indicator 14 data, which measures the postschool outcomes of students with disabilities in areas such as higher education, employment, or other meaningful engagement after high school.

In April 2025, the Tennessee Department of Education, in collaboration with TransitionTN through the TN-TAN network, hosted the annual Transition Academy. The event brought together 359 participants, including educators, administrators, transition specialists, and service providers. This year's theme, "The Power of Self-Advocacy: Empowering Youth to Take the Lead," focused on enhancing transition planning and improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Speakers and guest panelists highlighted the essential role of self-advocacy in helping students navigate high school and their postsecondary paths.

Why Postsecondary Outcomes Matter

What is Indicator 14?

Indicator 14 (I-14) is a measure used to track the postschool outcomes of students with disabilities. I-14 assesses the success of students transitioning to adulthood, specifically in terms of their engagement in higher education, employment or other postsecondary activities.

Why is Indicator 14 Important?

I-14 data is crucial for the improvement of student transition programs for individuals with disabilities. These results provide valuable insights into how well schools are preparing students with disabilities for life after high school. Data helps identify areas in need of improvement and support efforts to ensure students with disabilities have access to opportunities in which they can succeed.

To celebrate Tennessee's progress and identify opportunities for continued growth, explore the most recent Indicator 14 Statewide Summary Report by scanning the QR code.



Historically, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in Tennessee gathered post-school outcome data for APR Indicator 14 by surveying only a small sample of students with disabilities and not on a consistent annual basis. In a major shift, Tennessee conducted its first ever statewide census survey in 2024, with each LEA making efforts to contact every student with a disability who exited during the 2022 to 2023 school year. This comprehensive approach was designed to provide a more complete and accurate understanding of what students with disabilities are doing one year after leaving high school. From May to September 2024, data was collected from 147 LEAs across Tennessee. Each LEA made efforts to contact all former students with disabilities who exited during the 2022 to 2023 school year. Out of 7,430 students contacted, 5,233 completed interviews, resulting in an impressive 70.43% response rate. In April 2025, the results were released, showing that 79.69% of students with disabilities reported being engaged in higher education, competitive employment, or other postsecondary education or training within one year of leaving high school.

VR provided pre-employment transition services to students and youth with disabilities across all 95 counties in Tennessee. Services were provided by contracting with CRPs and local education agencies (LEAs) through Transition School to Work (TSW) grants. CRPs and TSWs provide instruction to students with disabilities in the areas of job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, work-based learning, counseling in postsecondary education, and instruction in self-advocacy. Students receive individualized instruction in these areas to develop skills and identify opportunities to continue their education, training, and employment after high school. Participation in Pre-ETS provides an earlier connection to VR services to support a seamless transition from high school to postsecondary training and employment. Additionally, VR worked closely with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to provide paid employment experiences for youth with disabilities across Tennessee beginning at age 14.

Over the last three years, VR has increased the number of Project SEARCH sites across Tennessee to 21. VR has increased the number of Transition School to Work grants to 61. As of 05/31/2025, 19,940 students and youth aged 14 to 21 have open cases with Vocational Rehabilitation to receive Pre-ETS. They have also seen an increase in the number of new Individual Plans for Employment developed for students and youth needed to achieve their individualized career goals. From FY 23-25, VR has increased the number of new Individual Plans for Employment developed for students and youth by 27%.

Classroom to Career, Student Secondary Transition

For Old Hickory resident Taelor Watson, the journey to a career didn't begin in a classroom. It started washing cars with his grandad. What began as a simple chore evolved into a passion—one that would eventually lead him to the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC) in Smyrna and set him on the path to a career in auto detailing.

"I just kept looking at the cars we washed," Taelor recalled. "And I thought, I want to do this. I want to do something like this."

Before TRC, Taelor struggled to find a program that fit his needs. After trying college and exploring the Marine Corps, he struggled to find the right place for him — until TRC opened a new door.

TRC proved to be more than just a training center. For Taelor, it led to meaningful relationships and a career he is passionate about.

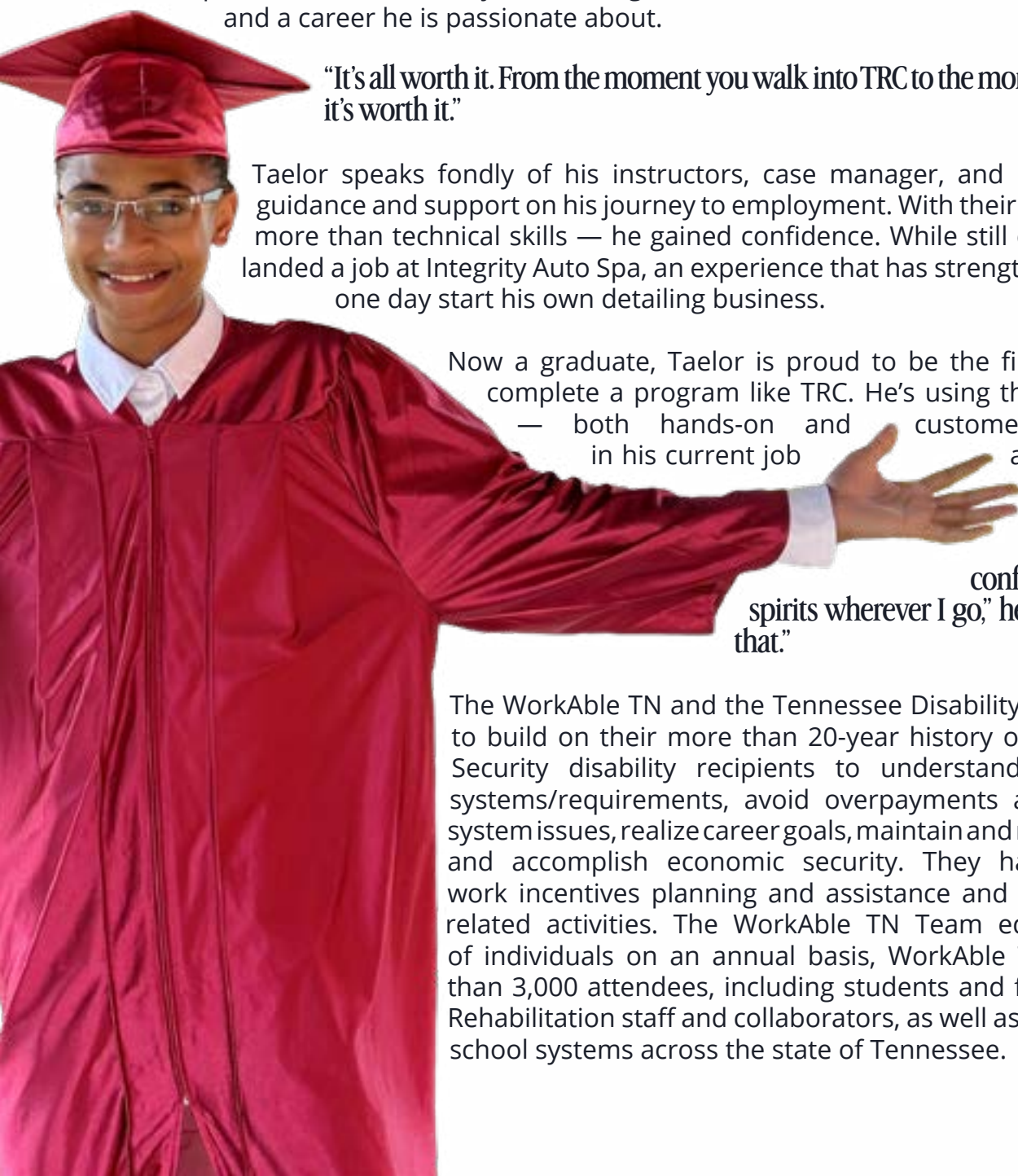
"It's all worth it. From the moment you walk into TRC to the moment you walk out—it's worth it."

Taelor speaks fondly of his instructors, case manager, and his peers for their guidance and support on his journey to employment. With their help, Taelor gained more than technical skills — he gained confidence. While still enrolled at TRC, he landed a job at Integrity Auto Spa, an experience that has strengthened his desire to one day start his own detailing business.

Now a graduate, Taelor is proud to be the first in his family to complete a program like TRC. He's using the skills he learned — both hands-on and customer service-related — in his current job and is making plans for the future.

"I try to keep high confidence and high spirits wherever I go," he said. "TRC gave me that."

The WorkAble TN and the Tennessee Disability Coalition continue to build on their more than 20-year history of supporting Social Security disability recipients to understand complex benefit systems/requirements, avoid overpayments and other support system issues, realize career goals, maintain and retain employment, and accomplish economic security. They have also provided work incentives planning and assistance and other employment related activities. The WorkAble TN Team educates thousands of individuals on an annual basis, WorkAble TN educates more than 3,000 attendees, including students and families, Vocational Rehabilitation staff and collaborators, as well as staff of the various school systems across the state of Tennessee.



Alexander's Access to Benefits, Post-Secondary Success

Alexander contacted the WorkAble TN Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) program and spoke with a Community Work Incentives Coordinator (CWIC) when referred by his Vocational Rehabilitation counselor. At the intake meeting, he explained he became paralyzed and started receiving SSDI in 2021. He is married and has one child. Alexander also received a degree in Engineering after becoming paralyzed.

Upon graduation, he had numerous questions and concerns about pursuing employment. Alexander's job searching resulted in several excellent prospects. He applied for remote engineering jobs that paid in the \$70,000 per year range. However, his primary fears were losing his medical insurance, and what might happen if his condition deteriorated and he could no longer work. Alexander receives \$1134.60 SSDI per month. He receives no Medicare Premium assistance, so his net monthly SSDI benefit is \$959. Alexander's child is not receiving a dependent benefit, but does receive Tennessee Cover Kids (a TennCare program) for insurance.

The CWIC reviewed the work incentives and safety nets that would allow Alexander to work without fear of being terminated from benefits for some time while providing guidance on closely examining employer-sponsored benefits for his child. He accepted an engineering position that pays \$76,000 per year with excellent insurance, and his child will no longer need Cover Kids. Alexander is working toward terminating SSDI benefits and believes he made the best decision for himself and his family.

Historically, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in Tennessee gathered post-school outcome data for APR Indicator 14 by surveying only a small sample of students with disabilities and not on a consistent annual basis. This limited approach provided only a partial view of how students were doing after high school. In a major shift, Tennessee conducted its first ever statewide census survey in 2024, with each LEA making efforts to contact every student with a disability who exited during the 2022 to 2023 school year. This comprehensive approach was designed to provide a more complete and accurate understanding of what students with disabilities are doing one year after leaving high school. This expanded effort marks a significant step forward in informing how we support successful transitions to adult life. From May to September 2024, data was collected from 147 LEAs across Tennessee. Each LEA made efforts to contact all former students with disabilities who exited during the 2022 to 2023 school year. Out of 7,430 students contacted, 5,233 completed interviews, resulting in an impressive 70.43% response rate. In April, 2025, the results were released, showing that 79.69% of students with disabilities reported being engaged in higher education, competitive employment, or other post-secondary education or training within one year of leaving high school.

Updated Strategic Plan

Ahead of FY 2025 -2026, the Employment First Task Force developed a new Strategic Plan with updated goals and strategies to effectively pursue disability employment in the Tennessee workforce. The creation of the new strategic plan was truly a collaborative process. What matters to one agency might not be within the abilities of another. Nonetheless, they are tasked with identifying what matters most to Tennesseans with disabilities and the aging population who continues to look for success in their workplace.

IPS Expansion

The Employment First Task Force is looking to expand Individual Placement and Support employment opportunities to all 95 Tennessee Counties. Under the previous strategic plan, IPS expansion fell under the goal of Service Alignment. IPS Services are currently being offered in 46 counties, serving over 1,600 Tennesseans (FY24). This would consist of a collaboration between the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and the Department of Human Services, specifically the Vocational Rehabilitation Division. The new strategic plan also hopes to in explore the use of IPS within new populations, including individuals on the autism spectrum, substance abuse disorder, and Tennesseans exiting the foster care system.

Technology and Innovation

There is a continued emphasis on the role that technology and innovation play in equal employment success for Tennesseans of all abilities. The Employment First Task Force aims to improve access to technology and job opportunities in both urban and rural communities, with expanded internet access and technology training.

Community Awareness

Tennessee business and entities must be knowledgeable of the impact of Employment First for efforts to succeed in real world settings. In the next strategic plan, the Employment First Task Force is looking to create cross-agency awareness campaigns that highlight employment success stories at local, regional and state levels. The updated Strategic Plan places a new emphasis on plain language to be more inclusive to those without knowledge of the mission. Plain language allows the Task Force to create deeper connection with community leaders and area businesses who are looking to take the next step in inclusive hiring. There will also be an increased awareness regarding financial literacy and ABLE accounts for individuals that are employed.

Student Transition

The updated strategic plan continues to target transition stakeholders: students, families, advocates and educators. These strategies include expanding districts' knowledge of agencies and opportunities available to students with disabilities, offering more resources to families as they prepare for young adulthood and increasing the awareness of Indicator 14 data. The Employment First Task Force also looks to continue to support school-based professionals and Pre-ETS providers through trainings and resources.

Employers

In line with the mission to create and expand employment opportunities, the Employment First Task Force aims to increase the number of employers that recognize the value of hiring people with disabilities. There will also be increased efforts to positively recognize businesses that practice inclusive hiring. Various agencies and organizations will continue to connect potential employers and job seekers to opportunities best suited for them.

Transportation

This is the second new goal in the updated strategic plan. To wholly support individuals with disabilities looking for success in the workforce, people need reliable transportation to and from their place of work. The Employment First Task Force recognizes the importance of transportation when considering career planning and job search process. More information needs to be provided to potential employers regarding commuter benefits and transportation options available to them.

Appendices

STATE OF TENNESSEE

EXECUTIVE ORDER

BY THE GOVERNOR
No. 28

AN ORDER ESTABLISHING THE TENNESSEE EMPLOYMENT FIRST INITIATIVE TO EXPAND
COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TENNESSEANS WITH DISABILITIES

WHEREAS, Tennesseans with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders and other disabilities, disproportionately experience high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and dependence upon publicly funded programs; and

WHEREAS, my Administration is committed to supporting the Employment First Initiative establishing competitive and integrated employment, where work is performed in a typical work setting for a competitive wage.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Bill Haslam, Governor of the State of Tennessee, by virtue of the power and authority vested in me by the Tennessee Constitution and the laws of Tennessee, do hereby order and direct the following:

1. State agencies coordinate efforts to increase opportunities for integrated and competitive employment for Tennesseans with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illnesses, substance abuse disorders and other disabilities.
2. The Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities convene an Employment First Taskforce ("Taskforce").
3. The Taskforce shall consist of representatives from the agencies administering disability services, family members of persons receiving employment services, vocational rehabilitation, workforce services and education, as well as consumer advocates and third party disability service providers.
4. This Taskforce shall:
 - a. Identify state agency policies and procedures that create barriers and disincentives for employment of people with disabilities and develop recommendations to reduce or eliminate those barriers and disincentives to better meet the needs of individuals who desire employment;
 - b. Identify best practices, effective partnerships, sources of available federal funds and opportunities for shared services among existing state agencies to increase integrated and competitive employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities;
 - c. Review and consider the recommendations of the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) to increase opportunities for integrated and competitive employment for Tennesseans with disabilities.
 - d. Develop training on disability employment for state agencies, provider agencies, individuals being supported and their families in order to raise awareness of effective strategies for achieving integrated and competitive employment outcomes.
5. The Taskforce shall convene for its initial meeting on or before August 1, 2013. Thereafter, the Taskforce shall meet quarterly and provide an annual progress report to the Governor.

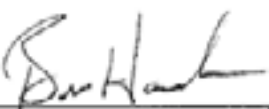
IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have subscribed my signature and caused the Great Seal of the State of Tennessee to be affixed this **19th** day of **June, 2013**.

ATTEST:



SECRETARY OF STATE





GOVERNOR

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE STRATEGIC PLAN

MISSION:

Create and expand employment opportunities for all Tennesseans with disabilities.

VISION:

People with disabilities have equal access to employment opportunities.

EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 28

An order establishing the Tennessee Employment First initiative to expand community employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities.

GOALS:

1. SERVICE ALIGNMENT:

Align service delivery systems and strengthen coordination at all levels for a seamless customer experience.

2. TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION:

Improve access to technology and enable its use to expand employment options.

3. EMPLOYERS:

Increase the number of employers who value and hire people with disabilities.

4. COMMUNITY AWARENESS:

Build awareness and shared commitment to Employment First for all Tennesseans.

5. STUDENT TRANSITION:

Prepare students for employment and post-secondary success.

GOAL 1: SERVICE ALIGNMENT

Align service delivery systems and strengthen coordination at all levels for a seamless customer experience.

STRATEGIES:

- Continue to set employment target and use national employment data to monitor statewide progress.
- Expand and update MOUs/Interagency Agreements as needed to provide interagency coordination and system improvements.
- Identify and seek solutions to public policy and regulatory barriers to employment.
- Create and support initiatives to promote service alignment at community level.
- Take a system-wide approach to developing systems and funding support for provider agencies and direct support professionals.

METRICS:

- Annual review/update of “close the gap” infographic
- Annual review schedule of MOUs
- # legislation/policies provided input
- # and outcomes with partners
- # community level initiatives & results
- Results of efforts to support providers and DSPs across state agencies

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE STRATEGIC PLAN (CONTINUED)

OBJECTIVES:

1. Annually update of the Task Force's shared "close the gap" data goal.
2. Maintain an up-to-date interagency MOU outlining employment services for transition age youth.
3. Identify at least one cross-agency initiative to address collaboratively.
4. Provide Policy Updates at each Task Force meeting.

GOAL 2: TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Improve access to technology and enable its use to expand employment options.

STRATEGIES:

- Expand the availability of devices, internet, software, and training so more people are equipped with technology needed to access services.
- Increase awareness of technology resources and supports through Pathfinder and other venues.
- Assess cross-agency use of technology resources and methods available through Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DIDD), Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DMHSAS), TennCare, Department of Education (DOE), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Department of Health (DOH), Department of Children's Services, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and TN Technology Access Program (TTAP) to identify areas for improvement and opportunities for collaboration.
- Identify employers to incorporate technological innovations toward inclusivity for building awareness and collaboration for employment.
- Pursue designation of TN as a Technology First State.

METRICS:

- # of people using technology solutions in an employment environment
- # of events, presentations, awareness activities
- Establishment of cross-agency committee or council
- Annual cross-agency report with consistent tracking/standards
- Annual employer snapshot
- TN designated as Tech First State

OBJECTIVES:

1. Develop a universal reporting tool with clear definition of terms for assistive/supportive technology to capture the use of technology in employment.
2. Establish a baseline of how agencies monitor and increase awareness of technology resources.
3. Create a committee of stakeholder agencies to assess technology resources, strengths and opportunities and develop an initial plan of action for the committee.
4. Obtain designation of TN as a Technology First State.

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE

STRATEGIC PLAN (CONTINUED)

GOAL 3: EMPLOYERS

Increase the number of employers who value and hire people with disabilities.

STRATEGIES:

- Work with the Governor's Office to enhance jobs4tn.gov to connect employers and job seekers with disabilities.
- Work with local and state Chambers of Commerce to build relationships with employers.
- Work with Department of Human Resources (DOHR) to create & support agency specific pilot programs that increase employment opportunities across the state.
- Research and replicate best practices in engaging employers (such as working with VR and their Business Employer Consultants Program and starting state chapter of Disability:IN)
- Get baseline, set targets, and monitor progress for TN as a Model Employer in collaboration with DOHR.
- Seek input from employers to learn how best to connect with them.
- Survey regional job landscape to identify job opportunities for students in their area.

METRICS:

- # of employers that claim TN Tax Credit (determine source for this data)
- # applicants that self-ID as individuals with disabilities (IWD)
- # relationships with new employers
- # of agencies participating in pilot programs and # of hires
- # of employees who self-ID as IWD

OBJECTIVES:

1. Through July 31st, 2023, Receive applications for the pilot of the Inclusive Employers Awards Program.
2. By September 1st, 2023, Review applications and finalize scoring procedures.
3. By September 30th, 2023, Notify businesses and State Agencies of determination.
4. By December 2023, Recognized award recipients.
5. By December 2023, explore ways to increase use of TEFIE – Comms work group (Tool Kit)
6. By April 15, 2024, Refine Inclusive Employers Award Program.
7. April 15, 2024, Launch second annual Inclusive Employer Award for 2024.
8. By June 30th, 2024, launch the survey to determine how to support businesses in recruiting, hiring and retaining people with disabilities.
9. By June 30, 2024, explore MOU for training AJC staff - disability training
10. By June 30, 2024, explore MOU to ensure disability training is provided to all agencies that do disability related work.
11. By June 30, 2024, work with DIDD to create an RDA for TEFIE Award

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE

STRATEGIC PLAN (CONTINUED)

GOAL 4: COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Build awareness and shared commitment to Employment First for all Tennesseans.

STRATEGIES:

- Develop a cross agency awareness campaign to feature success stories about individuals, employers and local communities.
- Highlight state level partnership successes to promote local community collaboration.
- Recognize employers as integrated part of focus on employment in local communities by working with local Chambers.
- Increase awareness and support for implementation of Supported Decision Making through the Center for Decision Making Support: www.tndecisionmaking.org.
- Compile and review existing communication resources across departments and leverage those channels to create unified messaging.
- Increase communication channels with self-advocacy organizations to share employment-related information.

METRICS:

- # of organizations participating in the Employment First (E1st) communication group
- Awareness outputs and reach across agencies
- #/Results of strategies for accessibility to reach underserved/ unserved & marginalized populations
- Extent of coordination for data tracking among E1st members

OBJECTIVES:

1. Increase communication output, reach, and engagement of unified employment messaging. Continue to collect and track output and reach.
2. Establish targets in four areas of outreach: Language translation, plain language, accessibility, targeted partnerships with organizations reaching unserved/underserved populations.
3. Increase outreach to employers. Add employer representation as regular participants in the Employment First Task Force Community Awareness Subgroup.
4. Produce and present annual Expect Employment Report to the Governor outlining progress on the strategic plan.
5. Conduct at least one cross-agency coordinated social media campaign with shared employment messaging (e.g., #HireMyStrengths for Disability Employment Awareness Month).
6. Develop two stories on state level partnership successes and employer successes to feature in cross-agency platforms (e.g., social media, Breaking Ground magazine, agency newsletters).

EMPLOYMENT FIRST TASK FORCE

STRATEGIC PLAN (CONTINUED)

GOAL 5: STUDENT TRANSITION

Prepare students for employment and post-secondary success.

STRATEGIES:

- Expand transition-focused projects like ACL Community Based Transition Planning Grant to the local level.
- Leverage existing resources such as ARC of TN and STEP to Increase awareness of transition/employment at younger ages with students, families, and educators.
- Leverage Transition TN as a resource to strengthen transition planning.
- Coordinate with CTE for preparation of teachers to work with students.
- Provide more training for HS teachers/Pre-ETS providers to help students prepare for changing work environment.
- Develop materials aimed at education administrators to show importance of investing in transition and employment.
- Collaborate with transition stakeholders (e.g., VR, DOE, Transition Tennessee, Family Engagement, etc.) to showcase schools and programs in the state that effectively connect students to early work experiences.
- Increase paid work opportunities for students while they are still in school.

METRICS:

- # students in post High School programs
- Graduation rates
- Quality indicators for transition assessment, planning & services (Easy IEP, Indicators 13 and 14)
- Outcomes for Transitional Professional Development modules
- # of students with disabilities participating in Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses and as CTE concentrators
- # of students engaged in work-based learning through DOE and VR

OBJECTIVES:

1. Increase enrollment/training in Work-Based Learning (WBL) experiences and courses and the connection to CTE courses.
2. Increase the number of transition stakeholders (i.e., special educators, Pre-ETS providers, school and district leaders, VR counselors, VR leadership) who are trained on preparing students for postsecondary employment expectations.
3. Create an interactive graphic of how each organization serves students as they transition into adult including how they are connected, what they do, and who they serve.

Employment First Task Force Members

Executive Leadership Team

Jordan Allen,
Deputy Commissioner of Program Operations, Department of Disability & Aging

Carrie Brna,
Director of Employment Innovation & Community Inclusion, Department of Disability & Aging

Pablo Juarez,
Co-Director, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

Lauren Pearcy,
Executive Director, Council on Developmental Disabilities

Members

Kevin Wright, Assistant Commissioner of the Division of Rehabilitation Services, Department of Human Services

Sundi Wright, HR Administrator, Diversity Programs, Department of Human Resources

Emily Duchac, Mobility and Accessible Transportation Manager, Department of Transportation

Heidi Haines, Executive Director, The Arc Tennessee

Stephanie Connell Cowherd, Associate Director, University of Tennessee-Center for Literacy, Education and Employment

Doria Panvini, Parent Advocate

Dwayne Webb, Director of Day & Employment, St. John's Community Services

Pam Hollingsworth, Employment Services Director, Progress Inc.

Robert Nicholas, Coordinator, Project SEARCH Knoxville

Cara Kumari, Assistant Commissioner of Communications and External Affairs, Department of Disability & Aging

Krystyne Brown, Deputy Director of Communications and External Affairs, Department of Disability & Aging

Nakeisha Ricks, Director of Workforce Services, Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Alison Gauld, Low Incidence and Autism Coordinator, Department of Education

Blake Shearer, Transition Director, Division of Rehabilitation Services, Department of Human Services

Jeff Fladen, Executive Director, NAMI Tennessee

Kelly Kuhns, Employment Director, Employment and Community First CHOICES, Division of TennCare

Lisa Primm, Executive Director, Disability Rights Tennessee

Matthew Parriott, Director of Communication, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Ruth Brock, Program Supervisor, Supported Employment, Department of Human Services
Cristi Blalock, Employment Services Coordinator, Frontier Health

Stephanie Potter, Employment Specialist, Amerigroup

Tiffany Ramsey, Vocational Rehabilitation Services Director, Department of Human Services

Jacqueline Johnson, Section Chief, Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs, Department of Health

Catherine Bledsoe, Manager of Special Education Postsecondary Transition, Department of Education

Ellyn Wilbur, Executive Director, Tennessee Association of Mental Health Organizations

Jessica Awsumb, Research Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University

Ben Schwartzman, Research Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University

Mark Liverman, Director of Wellness and Employment, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Nichole Phillips, LTSS Employment Services & Supports Specialist, BlueCare

Aimee Rogers, LTSS Employment Services & Supports Specialist, BlueCare

Tiffanie Whitaker, Statewide IPS Trainer

Sebby Edwards, Employment Specialist, UnitedHealthCare Corporation

Carla Garrett, Youth Grant Program Manager, Department of Labor & Workforce Development

John Camperlino, Employment Specialist, United Healthcare Corporation

Kendra Mitchell, Program Director, Department of Health

Bruce Keisling, Executive Director, UT Center on Developmental Disabilities

Task Force Workgroup Participants

Service Alignment (Employee Roundtable),
Lauren Pearcy

Behavioral Health,
Mark Liverman, Stephanie Cooper

Transportation,
Emily Duchac

Communications,
Kathleen Hilt, Danielle C Malkin-Martinez

Communications,
Sundi Wright, Tanika Arms

