

WA State

Alderbrook Employment Forum



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The Washington State Employment First Community gathered again at the Alderbrook Resort in Union, WA, on October 23-25, 2024. The expressed goals included:

- Celebrate Accomplishments.
- Recommit to Core Values.
- Advance and Lead on Employment First.
- Strengthen and Expand Community Inclusion.
- Engage in Strategic Planning for 2030.

This gathering happened as Washington observes 20 years of the Working Age Adult Policy (WAAP) (2004) which created the first clear statewide expectations for employment for all with an intellectual or developmental disability (I/DD) in the USA. It is also 17 years since a 2007 gathering, also at Alderbrook, to develop concrete steps for

full implementation of the Policy. This previewed the 2012 Washington State Legislation supporting integrated employment as the first choice for services for all working-age adults. Today, nearly 35 states have Employment First legislation, executive orders, or state agency policy. This 2024 Employment Forum was the first since that worldwide pandemic and back-to-back Forums in 2017 and 2018.

“It has been a while since many of us have been in the same room. I appreciated the opportunity to be in conversation again with the focus on employment.”

About 150 people participated in the 2024 gathering, and included: people with lived experience, employment service provider personnel, family members, county personnel, educators, case managers, training and technical assistance providers, and state agency leadership from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Developmental Disabilities Administration.

The 2023-2024 WA State Dan Thompson Employment Rallies set the stage for this event. These rallies included six regional events, culminating in a statewide rally in Ellensburg on the campus of Central Washington University, with nearly 700 people participating in person or online. These Rallies featured:

- Paid emcees and presenters with lived I/DD experience;

- A recommitment to Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) Guiding Values of Inclusion, Status and Contribution, Relationships, Power and Choice, Health and Safety, and Competence;
- Recommitment to all supports needed for individuals to be successful;
- Showcases of employment success stories;
- Emphasis on community building and a live broadcast for virtual participants.

The Rally materials were provided in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, and Korean.

The final statewide Rally in Ellensburg included an important discussion about “Who are we leaving behind?” Answers to this question included people with personal care needs, behavior support needs, people from the LGBTQ+ community, individuals and families for whom English is a second language, families who have immigrated; people in more rural areas and people with a dual diagnosis.

From these Rallies, themes emerged to continue the discussion at Alderbrook.

- Collaboration and Advocacy
- Partnering Equitably with All Communities
- Comprehensive Supports for All

Each theme was discussed on topical breakout discussions in terms of: Person Centered Systems and Supports; Employer, Community Education and Engagement; and Modernization from Policy to Practice.

Sessions at the Forum were led by people with lived experience. Ivanova Smith was the emcee for full group discussions. John Lemus described his journey from years of unemployment, being offered a sub-minimum wage on a work crew, to now working in leadership, training and advocacy roles.

The State and National context also informed the Alderbrook discussions.

Washington State

Policy and Legislation

As noted earlier, the 2004 Working Age Adult Policy previewed Washington’s 2012 Employment First Legislation, the elimination of segregated pre-vocational services in 2019, and the elimination of sub-minimum wages in 2023. Other states have followed this path of expanding CIE, reducing and eliminating segregated day services and sub-minimum wages.

The Data

Washington has long been a leader in the USA in competitive integrated employment (CIE) for people with I/DD. In charts made available by DDA, the data show a 63% increase in people earning a wage from 2004 to 2023 (4,770 in 2004, 7865 in 2023). Employment Security Reported a 320% increase in earnings by DDA clients (from \$30 million in 2004 to more than \$94 million in 2023).

At Alderbrook, the Institute on Community Inclusion (ICI), UMass-Boston reported Washington’s progress with 83% of people receiving employment services, compared to 23.5% nationally. It was also noted that, in generating these results, Washington per capita spending is not higher than other states, with spending at about the national average.

Washington is also supporting the leadership of people with lived experience as evidenced by the Dan Thompson Rallies and the Employment Forum. In a related development (and the first of its kind in the USA), Washington’s Legislature passed Legislation in March 2024 – “Nothing About US Without Us” - bringing the voice of people with lived experience into all relevant state commissions, advisory committees, task forces, and work groups.

The 2020 worldwide pandemic created an environment where everything seemed to freeze in place across the country and around the world, including employment services. Yet Washington found a way to, not only survive but to thrive in these unprecedented circumstances. Employment service providers found ways to support individuals virtually and discovered how many people were working “essential jobs”. Washington invested in training employment specialists’ personnel and others, with the intention of helping paid staff develop the skills to achieve greater employment outcomes.

National Context

Across the USA, some things have also changed. The Administration on Community Living (US DSHS) and the Office of Disability Employment Policy (US DOL) continue to invest, in many states, in increasing CIE and reducing dependence on sheltered work and other segregated settings. At least a dozen states have eliminated sub-minimum wages, and additional states are considering doing so. In 2023, the US Department of Labor announced a “Comprehensive Review” of the national rules about sub-minimum wages.

In Oregon, the Lane v. Brown lawsuit, based on the Americans with Disability Act and the Olmstead Decision, about unnecessary segregation in sheltered workshops was dismissed in 2022. Oregon had met the expectations of the Settlement Agreement (2015). The lawsuit expected expansion of CIE and reduced reliance on segregated settings. Eliminating sub-minimum wages, and closing all sheltered workshops were not explicit goals. Both were the result of doing the work to expand CIE. While work remains, this progress in less than 10 years is notable.

The Home and Community Based Services “Setting Rule” moved to full implementation in early 2023. This Rule ensures that people who receive support through Medicaid’s programs have full access to community living and CIE in the most integrated settings. And that individuals with lived experience have person-centered plans and services as well as the autonomy to make choices and control the decisions in their lives. Link to ACL Settings Rule. [HCBS Settings Rule | ACL Administration for Community Living](#)

Messages from State Leaders

Important comments were provided by Washington State Agency Leaders at Alderbrook. Dr. Tonik Joseph, Assistant Secretary of the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA), said “we can’t go back”, to patterns of the past and that we needed support from other, non-disability government agencies to move forward in all aspect of life for people with disabilities. Ms. Dana Phillips, Director of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), said it is important to dream big for good jobs. Ms. Tania May, Assistant Superintendent of Special Education, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) talked about the passion in expanding School to Work services and outcomes.

The presence and participation of these state leaders provided strong support for the work of the I/DD Employment community in Washington. It was important for Alderbrook participants to see and hear from these leaders and their strong messages. It was also important for these leaders to see the enthusiasm and hear ideas from the Forum participants.

“The setting is great because it offers many opportunities to run into people. The way the brainstorming sessions were conducted was very helpful.”

Some Take Aways from Alderbrook Employment Forum 2024

As in past Alderbrook discussions and in other discussion settings around Washington, this event witnessed strong presence and participation of people across roles in the interest of integrated employment for individuals with I/DD. Participants were encouraged to use sticky notes to record ideas for each discussion session and place them on the wall for each theme and topical area. Wise (which will be 40 years old in 2025) created an Artificial Intelligence Generated Summary of all of the ideas and comments. ([Link to AI Summary here.](#)) This 12-page document is rich in scope and detail, and I encourage readers to take a close look. Rather than chronicle or try to summarize that document, I offer my observations about what themes strike me as steady over the years in Washington and what is different about the path forward.

Leadership and New Voices

“I plan to partner with new employment partners to expand our inclusive employment community.”

Two things are notable about leadership on employment in 2024. First is the investment in leadership by people with lived I/DD experience. This was especially evident at Alderbrook and at the Dan Thompson Rallies. While this has been building for years it is clearly becoming a welcomed expectation. And, I have no doubt it will continue and expand into many places and spaces.

Second, at this Alderbrook there were a larger number of new voices in the room, in addition to people with lived experience and families. More than 45 years have transpired since Washington State began innovative supported employment efforts and demonstration projects. In the early years, the question was “Can we do this?” Now the question is about how thoroughly it can be done for all, across the state, and how effectively. The leadership in Washington has been and will continue to change as many retire. What is not changing is the emergence of strong and effective leaders across the state.

As I wrote about Leadership in Washington after the 2007 Alderbrook Forum, and is still true today:

“Another asset in the Washington culture is an expectation of leadership from many. Regardless of role, age, or experience, leadership is welcomed in taking risks, offering ideas, and leading by example. Leadership knows no specific role, experience, or age. Rather, leadership can be shown from anyone committed to the employment outcomes. This promotes an attitude of accepting the situation and acting on it rather than getting stuck in the paralysis of uncertainty”.

Stories and Data both matter.

Washington continues to celebrate and learn from stories of individual, family, and community success. This makes this work more personal and real for everyone and generates ideas for better employment outcomes. At the same time, data about employment outcomes is public at the county and state levels and is always scrutinized to track progress and identify where improvement is needed.

Families continue to be the main support for people outside of employment services.

While this has been known for a long time, it seems to be coming more into focus in recent years. A focus on family support will be very important as the discussion continues about the number of hours worked or in community inclusion. A part of this discussion should include attention to natural supports and community level supports that can be a part of the solution to more hours.

Diversity, Equity and Culturally responsive employment services.

Topics related to diversity and equity were discussed in many sessions. This need relates to individuals as we understand “who is being left behind”, when language access is needed or where cultural issues are important. It relates to communities that are underserved, where there are growing populations where English is a second language. And it relates to the need for more diverse staff across roles in employment services.

Transportation and Personal Care.

These two topics seem to have come more in focus in recent years. Without reliable transportation, employment is either compromised or not even possible. And it is an issue where solutions must be developed at a community level. Developmental Disability services can support better transportation solutions but seem unlikely to solve the problem on their own.

The need for Personal Care has become more discussed as we realize the lack of personal care makes employment difficult or sometimes impossible. By whom and how personal care is provided in employment is another topic that will call for system-wide ideas and solutions.

Hours of Employment and Community Engagement.

My observation of Washington’s employment data is that the number of hours worked weekly by individuals with I/DD went down during and after the great recession of 2007 – 2009. And has not recovered to nearing 20 hours worked weekly. I also note that hours for individuals with low acuity work more hours than those with higher acuity. One explanation for why hours are not increasing may be because more people with higher acuity are being served, which may also be related to transportation and personal care issues.

Washington has, recently, arranged that individuals can have Employment Services AND Community Inclusion rather than one or the other. At the same time, Washington has clearly confirmed that it is “Employment First”. Making this an “And” statement rather than an “Or” statement is important.

Complicating this issue is emerging discussion about day habilitation programs. While the nature and delivery of this service is not clear to me, it is important to note, in my view, that an important part of this issue is the need for many individuals to have more

daytime hours of employment and community inclusion. And that relates back to family support. I also note that any discussion of added hours of service need also keep in mind the intent and the expectation of the “Settings Rule” related to choice, person-centered planning and fully integrated settings.

Final Thoughts

The issues noted above: family support, equity, transportation, personal care and hours engaged weekly are stubborn challenges with no ready solutions. While Washington state agencies, vendors and others have important roles going forward, long-term progress will surely call for significant collaboration at both the state and community levels.

The State of Washington I/DD community has a rich tradition of informed, honest, respectful, and productive discussions in the interest of supporting and improving employment and quality of life for individuals with lived I/DD experience, their families, and communities. The Alderbrook 2024 Employment Forum joins that tradition and history that now spans decades and several generations.

“We need to acknowledge that employment is only part of a person’s life. Community, friendship, relationships, housing, transportation, and everything else that makes up a human's life is just as important. Person-centered lives are what we need to work on. Always.”