



MDDC Policy Spotlight:

Employment

May 2025

Background

Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) want to work paid jobs in their communities, and they can. With the right supports, people with IDD can be successful in their careers and live meaningful lives as part of their community. However, people with IDD are much less likely to be employed than people without disabilities or people with different types of disabilities. Employment in the community helps people earn money, build confidence, and live more independently. When we support people with IDD in finding good jobs, everyone benefits – workers, employers, and communities.

Disability and Employment

Adults with IDD are more likely to be unemployed than adults without disabilities or adults with different types of disabilities.¹⁻⁴

- **"Unemployed"** means you want a job, but you do not have one.
 - People with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed as people without disabilities.⁵
 - People with cognitive disabilities, which can include IDD, are the least likely to be employed.
 - About 1 in 5 adults with IDD (17%) who receive services from the state had paid jobs in the community in 2023.⁴

Adults with IDD are also more likely to be underemployed.^{6,7}

- **"Underemployed"** means you have a job, but it is not a good fit for you or your needs. For example:
 - You do not work as many hours a week as you want,
 - You do not make a fair wage for your job, and/or
 - Your job is not a good fit for the skills you have.

Unemployment and underemployment are big problems in IDD communities. People with IDD want to work, and they can work with the right supports.⁷

Types of Employment

People with IDD want to do meaningful work for real pay. Not all jobs are the same.⁸



Segregated Employment

Segregated Employment includes jobs when people with disabilities work separate from people without disabilities. This includes places like sheltered workshops, or businesses that only hire people with disabilities.



Competitive Employment

Competitive Employment includes jobs where people with disabilities make the same amount of money, or wages, as people without disabilities who do the same job.



Integrated Employment

Integrated Employment includes jobs where people with disabilities work in the same place and do the same jobs as workers without disabilities.



Supported Employment

Supported Employment means a person gets support and services to do their job. This can include job coaches or workplace support plans.



Customized Employment

Customized Employment can be a type of supported employment. This is a job that matches a person's interests and skills with to an individualized, unique job.



Self-Employment

Self-Employment is one type of customized employment. People with IDD who are self-employed can create their own business to make money to support themselves.⁹⁻¹¹



Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a type of self-employment, where a person creates a business that they grow. When an entrepreneur's business grows, they can employ other people too.⁹⁻¹¹



Competitive, Integrated Employment (CIE) is the goal!

Competitive, integrated jobs mean people with disabilities are working in the community alongside people without disabilities, AND they get paid the same amount of money. Supported and Customized Employment can fall into this category. Competitive, integrated employment is real work for real pay.

People with IDD can and do work in CIE here in Massachusetts!

Community Spotlights: Real work for real pay



Collette Divitto • Collettey's Cookies

Collette is an entrepreneur with Down syndrome here in Massachusetts. She applied for many paid jobs in the community but was told she was not a "good fit." Collette started her own business, Collettey's Cookies! Collette's business is very successful, and it keeps growing. Now, Collette hires other people with disabilities because she knows they have valuable skills and can be great works, just like anyone else.

Visit Collettey's Cookies online: colletteys.com



Chloe Bertrand • Chloe's Shred Shed

Chloe is an entrepreneur who started her business, Chloe's Shred Shed, with the help of her family and their community: "Chloe discovered work through entrepreneurship was a powerful way for her to earn an income while offering a valuable service in the community. Individuals with IDD can be entrepreneurs! While entrepreneurship may not be of interest to everyone, for Chloe it provides a customized job experience that allows her to contribute with a sense of pride and purpose."¹²

Visit Chloe's Shred Shed online: ccshredshed.my.canva.site



Craig Kinney • Market Basket

Craig works part time at Market Basket. He is a valued member of his team. Working gives Craig a sense of purpose and it is an important part of his pride and identity. Medicaid services made it possible for Craig to achieve competitive and integrative employment through a supported employment model. Medicaid supported employment services have helped Craig be more self-sufficient and have greater financial security.

Sheltered Workshops and Subminimum Wage

- Too many people with IDD in the United States still work in segregated employment at sheltered workshops.⁹
- It is also still legal, or allowed, for employers to pay people with disabilities **subminimum wage** at sheltered workshops that are 14(c) certificate sites.⁹ In 2024, it was estimated that 38,000 people with disabilities earned subminimum wages.
- Segregated and subminimum wage jobs do not help prepare people with IDD to get community jobs later. Less than 5% of subminimum wage employees at sheltered workshops go on to community employment.^{10,11}
- In Massachusetts, 14(c) certificates are being phased out, so no one will have to work subminimum wage jobs in the future. There are currently 19 people still earning subminimum wage at 14(c) sites in Massachusetts.¹²
- Many other states are “phasing out” 14(c) certificates, too. Over 18 states have created laws that make sheltered workshops and subminimum wages illegal.¹⁴
- For example, Georgia passed the Dignity and Pay Act in April 2025. This law means all workers with disabilities have a right to earn at least minimum wage.¹⁸




Promising Practice: Instead of sheltered workshops, supported employment programs are much more effective and cost-effective to support people with IDD in achieving competitive, integrated employment. This is the case for people with high-levels of support needs, too.^{11,13,14}

Employment First Policy

“**Employment First**” is a policy idea that says the government should help people with disabilities work in their communities. They should do this before suggesting other services, like day habilitation programs.⁸

The federal government supports “Employment First.”

- In 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) set **competitive, integrated employment** as the preferred outcome for people with disabilities. The government invests federal money to support this goal.
- For example, in 2022, the U.S Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) announced \$167 million in grant funding for “Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment” (SWTCIE) demonstration projects.¹⁵



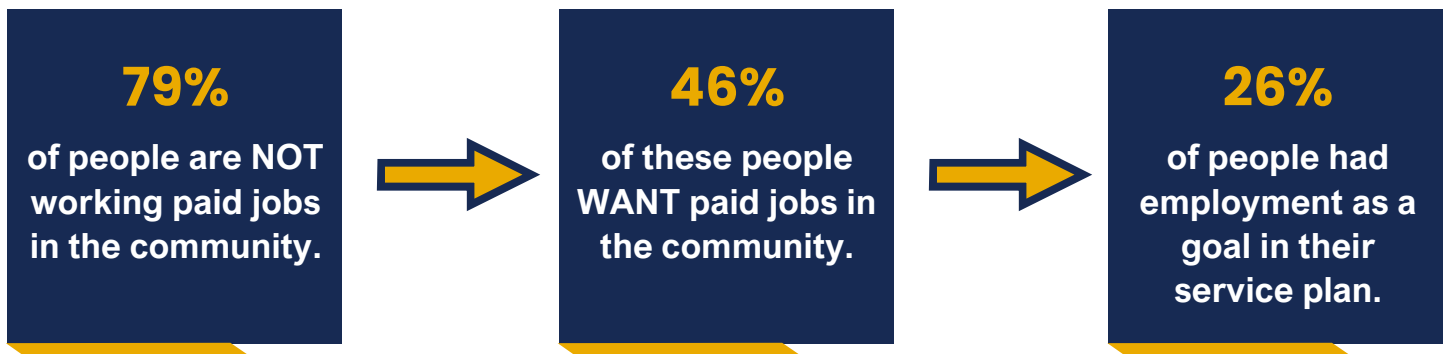
The 2022 chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor described subminimum wage as a “relic of a time when people with disabilities were viewed as unable to work and lacked federal protections.”¹⁵

Massachusetts is an “Employment First” state

- Massachusetts passed a law in 2010 that says the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services’ (DDS) goal outcome for people with IDD should be competitive, integrated employment.^{22,23} DDS created a blueprint to help our state better support people with IDD in achieving this goal in 2013.²⁴
- The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at University of Massachusetts Boston oversees the [Think Work! resource hub](#), which provides all states with data and tools to improve employment outcomes for people with IDD.²⁵ ICI also oversees Massachusetts’ [Employment First resource page](#).²³
- Even though Employment First policies were put in place over 15 years ago, people with IDD still face many barriers to achieving competitive, integrated employment here in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts Data: NCI-IDD Survey

- The National Core Indicators-Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (NCI-IDD) In-Person Survey (IPS) is the largest source of survey data from people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States.
- Massachusetts ran this survey during the 2021-2022 data collection cycle. A random sample of 400 adults with IDD who receive state services were included in this survey.²⁰



Promising practice: Service plans are an important tool to support people with IDD in getting jobs in their communities. Having an employment goal in a service plan is associated with much higher odds of achieving competitive, integrated employment.⁷

Employment Supports: Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

- The federal government gives every state money to fund Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies. VR agencies are required to help people with disabilities get jobs.
- Vocational Rehabilitation agencies are supposed to serve people with all types of disabilities. However, people with IDD are much less likely to receive support from Vocational Rehabilitation agencies than people with other types of disabilities.²⁷
- [MassAbility Career Services](#) is Massachusetts' Vocational Rehabilitation agency.
- In Massachusetts, only 4.3% of Vocational Rehabilitation case closures were for people with intellectual disabilities, and less than half of these cases ended with employment.²⁷

- MassAbility helps people with disabilities looking for jobs. They provide many different services like:²⁸
 - Job training and counseling,
 - Job placement assistance,
 - Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students who are transitioning out of school, and
 - Assistive technology supports.
- MassAbility also helps employers hire people with disabilities. They give employers training, provide financial support for internships, and can support workplace modifications.²⁸

Disability Benefits and Employment

Many people with IDD are eligible for benefits from the government that help them live their lives.²⁹ Government benefits include:

- Income benefits, like Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI),
- Voucher benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which helps people afford food or Section 8 Housing Vouchers which helps people get affordable housing, and
- Health Insurance benefits, like Medicaid (MassHealth).

These programs are designed to help people who need it most. When people earn more money, these benefits can be reduced or taken away. The increase in pay from jobs may not make up for the loss in benefits. This is called a “benefit cliff.”²⁹

In Massachusetts, only 6.6% of people who receive SSI benefits were employed.²⁷



Promising practice: Improved benefit coordination and planning can help people with disabilities work and keep benefits they need to live.²⁹ Individuals can meet with a Certified Employment Benefits Specialist to talk about SSI limited and Medicaid benefits.¹²

MassAbility provides [benefits counseling](#) for residents living in certain counties. Other Massachusetts residents can contact [Work Without Limits Benefits Counseling](#).

Other Barriers to Employment

Many people with IDD want to work but have a hard time getting jobs. Some barriers include:



Low Expectations and Discrimination

Some employers, educators, and community members mistakenly believe people with IDD cannot work or would not be good employees.^{30,31} This can make it hard for people with IDD to get jobs.³²



Transportation Issues

A lack of affordable and accessible transportation can make it hard to people with IDD to get to jobs in the community.³¹ This barrier is bigger in rural communities.



Limited Support Services

Not everyone who is eligible for services and supports from the states receives them. In some states, there are long waitlists for job training and support programs.



Promising practice: Medicaid (MassHealth) services and supports can help break down barriers to employment. Medicaid waiver programs can provide accessible transportation and employment services and supports. These services might not be required programs, but they are essential to people's wellbeing and employment opportunities.

Inclusive Hiring: Everyone Wins

- Employment is important to many people's lives, and this is the same for people with IDD.
- Competitive and integrated employment can help people with IDD build their self-esteem, confidence, and independence. It also helps them build important skills so they can grow in their careers.¹

- Overall, people with IDD are an “untapped workforce.” They can bring a lot of value to the places they work.^{33,34}
- People with IDD are dedicated to their jobs. On average, they have lower turnover rates than employees without disabilities. This can help employers keep a strong workforce.^{33,34}
- Research shows that people with IDD can contribute to a positive workplace environment, improve inclusivity, and attract new customers or clients to businesses and organizations.^{33,34}

Additional Resources

- **ASAN Employment First Resource -**
autisticadvocacy.org/actioncenter/issues/employment/first/
- **Think Work! Disability and Employment Data in Massachusetts -**
thinkwork.org/statedata
- **CEED Entrepreneurship Training Toolkit -**
crdjustice.org/eship

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About the MDDC

The Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council (MDDC) is an independent agency, funded by the federal government, dedicated to empowering people with developmental disabilities and their families to enjoy full productive lives by promoting self-sufficiency, community inclusion & opportunity.

The MDDC works to improve the system of supports for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families by bringing advocates together with policymakers to be sure people with developmental disabilities are included in policy decisions that impact their lives.

The MDDC also serves as an objective resource to inform public policy at the local, state and federal levels, to better meet the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

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