

MAXIMIZING EMPLOYMENT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN FLORIDA



THE
ABLE
TRUST™

In 1990, the Florida Legislature codified statutory language that reiterates our belief that Floridians with disabilities have immense potential and talents to contribute to the workforce and lead fulfilling lives. Florida recognizes that it is in the best interest of this state that individuals with disabilities be afforded an equal opportunity to be self-supporting, independent, productive members of society (s. 413.615(3), FS).

During the 2023 session, the Florida Legislature tasked The Able Trust with evaluating the systems in the state which provide services to persons with disabilities, to make recommendations for strengthening the statewide, coordinated services system, and identify systemic barriers to meaningful employment and economic independence for Floridians with disabilities. This report examines various factors that influence the employment prospects of persons with disabilities. This report fulfills that statutory requirement, presenting recommendations to improve outcomes in disability education, training, and employment.

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BACKGROUND

According to the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS), more than 41 million individuals in the United States are affected by disabilities that impact their capacity to work or engage in major life activities. In Florida, there are approximately 2.8 million residents who have reported a disability, roughly 13.4 percent of the state's population. It's important to note, however, that studies suggest the actual number of individuals with disabilities in Florida may be considerably higher, with estimates reaching 5.5 million, or 25 percent of the population. The variability in these figures is due in part to the fact that not all individuals choose to report their disabilities because the disability may not be a barrier to their employment, or they are choosing not to pursue state supports to improve their employment status for personal reasons.

Approximately 70 percent of individuals with disabilities have conditions that are not immediately apparent to others, unseen or invisible disabilities that can substantially interfere with an individual's daily activities. Examples of such conditions include arthritis, asthma, depression, chronic migraines, deafness or difficulty hearing, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, multiple sclerosis, lupus, epilepsy, fibromyalgia, traumatic brain injury, and various mental illnesses.

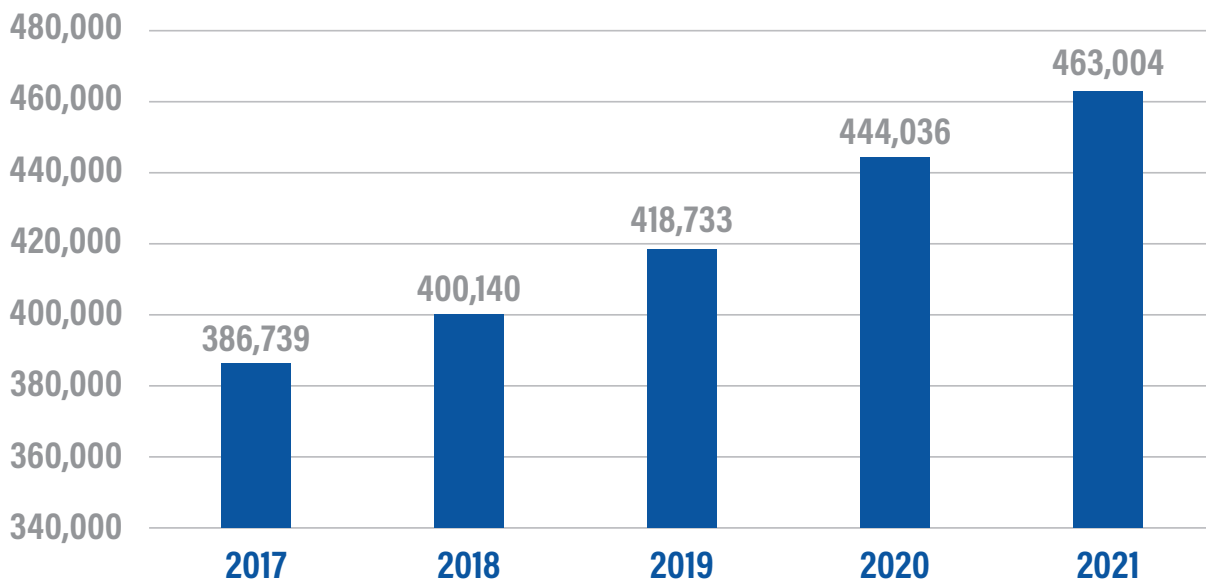
Understanding the prevalence and diverse nature of disabilities, including those that are unseen, is essential for policymakers, employers, and service providers to create more inclusive and accommodating environments for all individuals in our communities.

MAXIMIZING EMPLOYMENT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PWD)

Gainful employment empowers individuals to contribute positively to their families and communities. Maximizing opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in the workforce not only promotes economic and social mobility but also benefits the state economy. In fact, increasing labor force participation among persons with disabilities by 10 percentage points over the next decade could contribute an estimated \$111 billion to the Florida economy, with approximately \$1 billion in additional state tax revenues.

While a job is not an entitlement, it is undeniably an opportunity that should be accessible to all. The positive news is that the employment of persons with disabilities in Florida has been on an upward trajectory. From 2017 to 2021, there has been a notable 19.7 percent increase in the number of Floridians with reported disabilities, aged 18 to 64, who are gainfully employed. This trend is not only encouraging but also indicative of current efforts and the ongoing potential for further progress in fostering inclusivity and economic empowerment for individuals with disabilities in the state.

Floridians with a Disability Who are Working Age 18-64



U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data

While there are encouraging trends in the employment of persons with disabilities, it is essential to address certain concerning disparities. For instance, at the time of this analysis, individuals with disabilities represented only 6 percent of the total population actively participating in the labor force. Notably, more than half of all individuals with disabilities (56.6 percent) are not engaged in the workforce, in contrast to a notably lower figure of 18.1 percent for those who do not have disabilities. This considerable gap highlights a significant portion of the population with disability that faces barriers to workforce participation.

Furthermore, when considering full-time employment only, the contrast between the two groups is striking. Among individuals with disabilities that are in the workforce, only 24.0 percent are engaged in full-time work, while the percentage is significantly higher at 57.3 percent for those without disabilities. The difference between the two groups in part-time employment is smaller but still notable (19.4 percent to 24.5 percent).

Marketplace for Employment of PWD

Florida's projected job growth of 8.6 percent by 2032, equating to 858,219 new jobs, presents a promising outlook for the state's economy. However, many of the industries experiencing the most rapid growth are not traditionally large employers of individuals with disabilities. Nonetheless, these expanding industries offer a broader range of opportunities for all Floridians, and there's an opportunity to encourage industry partners to consider individuals with disabilities as a valuable source of talent.

It's important to note that workers with disabilities in Florida tend to be concentrated in occupation groups where the projected growth rates are expected to be slower than the average rate of 8.6 percent. Notably, the two largest occupation groups employing individuals with disabilities also happen to have the slowest projected growth rates overall. While individuals with disabilities have achieved success in finding employment in Sales and Related and Office and Administrative Support industries, it's probable that those seeking faster-than-average growth industries will face challenges despite the possibilities.

The table below outlines the current distribution of workers with disabilities in Florida across industries with the fastest projected growth rates:

Industry (2-Digit NAICS)	Projected Growth	2022 Jobs	2032 Jobs, Projected	% of Workplace with Disabilities in Florida
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	39.7%	216,369	302,310	2.0%
Accommodation and Food Services	29.4%	947,214	1,225,671	7.6%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	18.3%	3,883	4,593	0.0%
Educational Services	17.1%	205,445	240,564	4.8%
Transportation and Warehousing	15.7%	391,294	452,693	6.0%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	15.4%	682,255	787,208	7.9%
Health Care and Social Assistance	13.9%	1,200,256	1,367,306	12.5%
Other Services (Except Public Administration)	12.7%	453,326	510,757	4.9%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	12.0%	97,127	108,785	0.6%

Source: Lightcast growth projections and analysis of 2021 ACS 1-year estimates from IPUMS USA

Ironically, industries with growth rates faster than average continue to struggle to find talent to meet their workforce needs. This situation presents new opportunities for people with disabilities to enter the labor market or transition into occupations where they have historically been underrepresented. Promising areas for consideration include Personal Care and Service, Healthcare Support, and Management Occupations, all of which have growth rates exceeding the average and could potentially provide more opportunities for individuals with disabilities to thrive in the workforce.



EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Despite legal, advocacy, and legislative efforts, individuals with disabilities experience lower levels of employment, making it essential to understand how to improve the employment landscape for persons with disabilities.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) July 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS), 43.7 percent of individuals with disabilities who were not employed reported facing various barriers to securing employment. The most frequently cited obstacle was the limitations posed by their disabilities, with nearly 79 percent identifying this as their primary challenge. Other significant barriers included a lack of education or training (12.0 percent), the need for job-related accommodations (10.5 percent), and difficulties related to transportation (10.3 percent).

Non-disclosure of a disability may also lead to challenges. Accessibility.com reveals that although one in four professionals may have a disability, just 39 percent choose to disclose this information to their managers. The reluctance to disclose often stems from stigma and misconceptions. Job seekers with disabilities may fear that revealing their disability will result in negative consequences during the application process, when seeking specific job roles, or even for promotions. This apprehension is not unwarranted, as negative stereotypes surrounding individuals with disabilities persist, including perceptions of helplessness, reduced productivity, dependency, and limitations solely focused on their disability.

The hesitation to disclose disabilities can also impact hiring practices. Managers may have concerns about an individual with a disability's capacity to perform the job, fear of unintentionally causing offense, or concerns about how other employees will react to a new colleague with a disability.

Employers' concerns, as expressed in the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey on recruitment practices, illuminate the obstacles and hesitations organizations may encounter regarding disability inclusion initiatives. The study highlights that employers hold reservations about whether individuals with disabilities can effectively perform job tasks, leading to hesitancy in hiring them. Additionally, uncertainties regarding the cost of accommodations, concerns about budget implications, and the absence of strong leadership support can hinder efforts to foster inclusivity. Furthermore, discomfort or unfamiliarity with disability-related issues, fears of potential healthcare cost increases, concerns about customer and client attitudes, and apprehensions regarding higher workers' compensation premiums may all play a role in discouraging disability inclusion initiatives in the workplace.

As Florida's job landscape evolves, there's an essential role for policymakers, educators, and employers to collaborate in creating pathways that support the inclusion and career advancement of individuals with disabilities, aligning with the state's overall economic growth.

Unique Challenges for Some Categories of PWD in The Marketplace

The employment challenge becomes more pronounced for individuals with certain disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and some mental illnesses. Among these groups, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder face a heightened risk of unemployment when compared to other disability categories and even older adults with ASD. The symptoms and characteristics associated with ASD, such as persistent deficits in social communication and interactions, restricted and repetitive behavioral patterns, varying levels of adaptive functioning, and co-occurring mental health and medical concerns, can be perceived as barriers to employment. Research shows that approximately 37 percent of individuals with ASD report having been employed for 12 months or more, four years after leaving high school. However, multiple studies suggest that individuals with ASD are more likely to lose their employment due to behavioral and social interaction issues rather than their inability to perform assigned work tasks.

Despite these challenges, progress is being made in the employment landscape for individuals with disabilities, including those with autism or I/DD. Over the past two years, Florida has witnessed significant success thanks to a range of reforms. The state has achieved record numbers of career and technical education (CTE) students enrolled in public schools, record numbers of apprenticeships and participating employers, and record completions in college workforce programs. Additionally, Florida has seen a substantial increase in the number of adult learners enrolled in integrated education and training programs. These programs, which simultaneously or contextually combine basic skills or high school equivalency coursework with in-demand postsecondary programs, offer a unique opportunity for adult learners to acquire the skills necessary for meaningful employment. Furthermore, Florida has pioneered the development of an interagency workforce data dashboard, the first of its kind, which serves to assist Floridians in accelerating their journey towards economic self-sufficiency.

These accomplishments demonstrate that through targeted reforms and initiatives, it is possible to create more inclusive and supportive pathways to employment for individuals with disabilities, including those who face additional challenges associated with autism and I/DD. Continued efforts in this direction are essential to build on this progress and ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to achieve economic self-sufficiency and full participation in the workforce.

Florida is actively engaged in efforts to enhance the connection between individuals with disabilities and valuable credentials, along with the corresponding employment opportunities. For instance, the National Core Indicators program diligently tracks outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) who receive services from state I/DD agencies. In the 2018-2019 assessment, it was reported that 19 percent of working-age adults supported by state I/DD agencies across the nation were successfully employed in paid positions within their communities (National Core Indicators, 2019).

In Florida, 10 percent of Floridians are supported by the state I/DD agency securing paid community-based employment, while approximately half of these individuals are employed in roles that can be classified as competitive integrated employment (CIE). Nearly half (48 percent) of the I/DD group, participated in sheltered workshops or day programs, highlighting the prevailing challenges in achieving competitive integrated employment.

These statistics collectively underscore the pressing need for a novel training model that can provide individuals with I/DD enhanced opportunities to acquire the specific skills and credentials necessary to secure meaningful, competitive integrated employment. Such a model would not only empower individuals with disabilities to achieve greater economic independence and self-sufficiency but also contribute to the broader goal of fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all. It is imperative that policymakers, educators, and advocates collaborate to develop and implement effective strategies that address these disparities and promote the full inclusion and economic participation of individuals with I/DD.

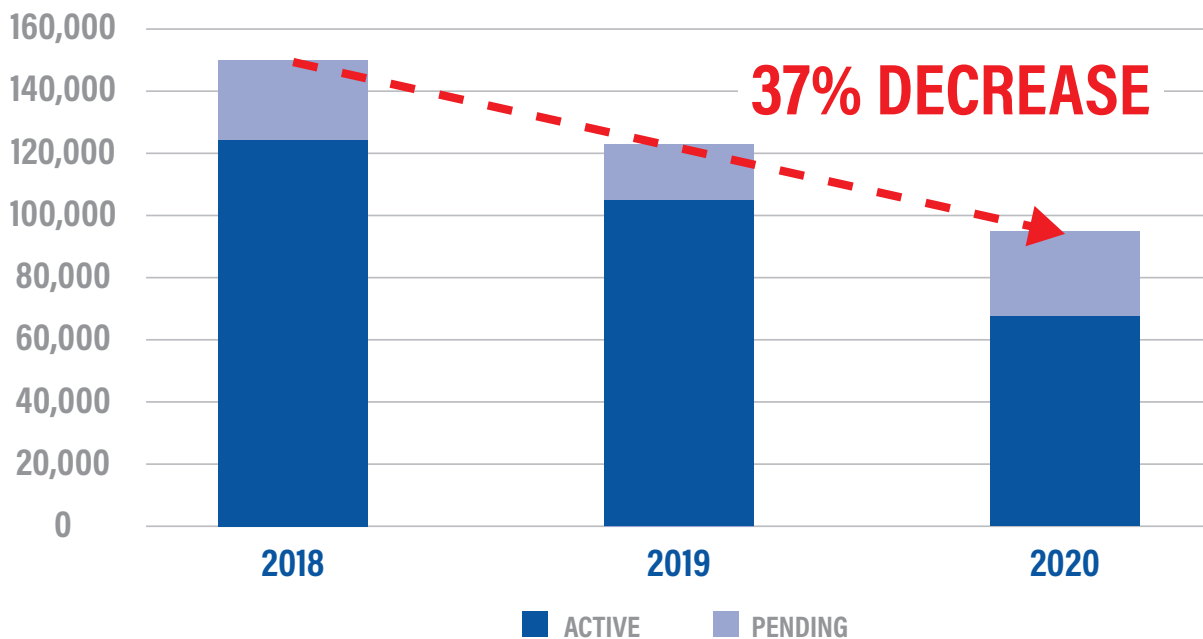
Employment Challenges for Persons with I/DD

In Florida, a significant percentage of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) aspire to have a paid job in the community, with 31 percent expressing a desire for such employment. However, a notable barrier exists, as 60 percent of individuals with I/DD currently do not have a paid job in the community, indicating a gap between aspiration and realization.

Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) authorizes employers, after receiving a certificate from the US Department of Labor, to pay subminimum wages - wages less than the Federal minimum wage - to workers who have disabilities for the work being performed. Section 14(c) does not apply unless the disability actually impairs the worker's earnings or productive capacity for the work being performed. The fact that a worker may have a disability is not in and of itself sufficient to warrant the payment of subminimum wages. The trend is shifting away from 14(c) settings, as evidenced by a consistent decrease in the number of active certificates held by community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) and a decline in the average number of individuals served per 14(c) setting over the past three reporting periods. This shift aligns with the broader national movement towards Employment First initiatives, promoting community-based, competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities.

According to data from the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE), there is a strong desire for paid jobs in the community among different age groups, with the highest aspiration reported among 18-22 year-olds at 65 percent, followed by 23-34 year-olds at 56 percent, and 35-54 year-olds at 45 percent. These findings emphasize the importance of transitioning away from 14(c) settings and towards community-based employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Number of People with Disabilities Earning Subminimum Wages Under 14c Certificates Held By Community Rehabilitation Programs



From National Core Indicators. Chart Generator 2017-18. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and Human Services Research Institute

In January 2014, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued a new federal rule (CMS-2249-F/CMS-2296-F), the “Settings Rule”, impacting sections of Medicaid law under which states may use federal funds to pay for home and community-based services (HCBS). The rule requires that all settings in which Medicaid-reimbursed HCBS are provided, including both residential and non-residential (day services), are integrated in and support full access to the greater community. This includes opportunities for people receiving HCBS to seek employment, work in integrated settings, and earn a competitive wage. The rule also requires the inclusion of opportunities for people receiving HCBS to spend time with others who don’t have disabilities and to use community services and participate in activities in their communities to the same degree of access as people who don’t have disabilities. In other words, the opportunities and experiences offered to the waiver participant should be empowering, allowing their lives to look like the general population without disabilities in terms of independence, choice, and community integration.

While states will be given time to come into compliance, after a reasonable period, Medicaid funding can no longer be used to pay for HCBS delivered in settings that do not comply with the new rule.

The Settings Rule has contributed to a steady decrease over the past three reporting periods in the number of individuals served in 14(c) settings with active certificates held by Florida community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). Additionally, there has been a steady decrease in the number of active certificates and the average number of individuals served per 14(c) setting. As recent as November 2023, the US Dept. of Labor reports that 21 Florida businesses hold a 14(c) certificate employing 437 individuals at subminimum. This represents a precipitous decrease since 2020, the data for which is reported in Appendix 2.

Some disability advocates in Florida and families have expressed concern about the impact of the Settings Rule on the quality of life for their family members with disabilities. The extent of the impact will not be fully known for another 1-2 years when the phase out in Florida is complete.



BARRIERS FOR FLORIDA FAMILIES

High school students with disabilities often face various barriers that can hinder their educational experience, limit opportunities for academic success, and affect their preparation for future endeavors. The nature and extent of these barriers can vary depending on the specific disabilities students have and the level of support available to them. One common barrier is the unequal educational opportunities students with disabilities may encounter, such as being tracked into lower-level courses, which can limit their exposure to a rigorous and inclusive academic environment. State graduation requirements can also pose challenges. Insufficient planning and preparation for the transition from high school to post-secondary education, employment, or independent living can also limit their opportunities for future success, despite the fact that transition planning for students with disabilities is required by federal law. The lack of understanding or advocacy from parents or guardians can compound these challenges, as many find the system of disability services, including transition planning, complex to navigate. This often results in families giving up, leaving students to face service cliffs at the end of high school.

Many families with early age children with disabilities also find that the early learning system is too complex and difficult to navigate without professional guidance. Funding for Inclusion Specialists is limited, which leads to limited access for families to these professionals. Although childcare providers are paid up to a 20 percent differential for serving children with disabilities, finding providers that have the skills to meet the needs of children with disabilities is difficult for families. Low pay and limited professional development for early learning direct service providers is also a challenge.

On the other end of the age spectrum, for aging caregivers and adult children with developmental disabilities, a unique set of challenges and barriers arises. Caregiving can be physically and emotionally demanding, and as caregivers age, exhaustion and declining health can become more prevalent. Access to support services, respite care, and in-home assistance may be limited, leaving aging caregivers with insufficient help to meet the needs of their adult children with developmental disabilities. The cost of caring for individuals with developmental disabilities, including medical care, therapies, and adaptive equipment, can be high, especially for those who do not qualify for Florida's iBudget (HCBS waiver) program or those on waiting lists. Finding suitable and accessible housing options for adult children with developmental disabilities can be challenging, with long waiting lists and limited availability for group homes or supportive living arrangements. While Florida has seen the development of inclusive housing communities, most are private pay, creating a barrier for individuals and families with limited financial means. Developing and implementing long-term care plans, including estate planning and guardianship arrangements, can also be complex and emotionally taxing.

Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach involving families, social service agencies, healthcare providers, and policymakers. Strategies to mitigate these challenges include greater education, creating support networks, advocating for increased funding for support services, and promoting accessible and inclusive housing and accessibility options.

SYSTEMWIDE INCONGRUENCE AND INEFFICIENCIES

While many states struggle to develop and implement systems of employment support for persons with disabilities, Florida is often seen as a leader with its aggressive ecosystem of partners working to address challenges to comprehensive service delivery and achieving the best possible outcomes. While Florida offers a range of services to support individuals with disabilities, the state's successes have allowed it to learn from these practices and how it can continuously improve on any incongruencies and inefficiencies of the process. Some of the challenges that continue to merit attention are outlined below.

Care & Support

COORDINATION CHALLENGES BETWEEN AGENCIES AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS-

Fragmentation occurs when more than one agency or program is involved in providing the same services to a specific population. Floridians with disabilities often navigate multiple agencies, programs, and providers to access necessary support, resulting in a complex and overwhelming process. Despite the strong effort Florida agencies make to coordinate, a lack of collaboration across programs and agencies can result in slow eligibility determinations, service gaps, inconsistent practices, and challenges in addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals with disabilities, and can lead to duplication of services, gaps in service delivery, and difficulties in accessing comprehensive and holistic support.

CHALLENGES ACCESSING HEALTHCARE, MENTAL HEALTH/BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT SERVICES, AND LONG-TERM CARE OPTIONS- Barriers such as limited insurance coverage, transportation difficulties, and a lack of healthcare providers with expertise in serving individuals with disabilities can result in disparities in healthcare access and outcomes. Notably, Medicare, employer-based health plans, and private health plans offered through the state health care exchanges generally do not cover services such as: personal care attendant services; home and community-based services; durable medical equipment; and extended therapies.

INCONSISTENT SERVICE AND QUALITY- There can be variations in service and quality across different providers and programs, leading to inconsistent experiences and outcomes. Many individuals with disabilities require long-term support services to meet their ongoing needs, such as personal care assistance, home modifications, and community integration support. However, the availability of these services is often limited, and individuals may face challenges in accessing and affording them.

LACK OF ACCESS AND CONNECTIVITY TO SUPPORT AND SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS-

Access to support in rural and underserved areas often presents a significant challenge for individuals with disabilities living in these regions. Limited transportation options, scarcity of service providers, and geographical barriers can restrict access to essential support and result in disparities in service availability and quality. Access to specialized professionals, assistive technology and communication services, transportation challenges, and limitations to resources within the rural or underserved region can pose significant barriers. Gaps in service availability can impede successful outcomes.

LIMITED RESOURCES- Limited fiscal and program resources can restrict the availability and accessibility of essential services, leading to long waitlists and delays in receiving support. Insufficient funding also impacts the quality and scope of services provided, limiting the ability to meet the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities effectively.

SHORTAGE OF DIRECT SERVICE AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS- Individuals with disabilities may require additional support within educational and work settings to thrive. While there is a growing demand for direct-support professionals, behavioral and mental health specialists, and healthcare practitioners in the disability sector, there is a shortage of qualified and trained professionals to meet these needs adequately. Additionally, the disability services workforce may not always reflect the diversity of the individuals they support, which can impact cultural competence and understanding of specific needs. Professionals in the disability services field often receive lower wages compared to other healthcare or social service sectors. Comparatively low compensation can make it difficult to attract and retain skilled and dedicated individuals. As result, many of the state's disability programs experience high turnover rates of direct line professionals, leading to even greater fragmentation of services and frustrations for individuals and their families.

SERVICE COORDINATION THROUGH LIFE'S TRANSITIONS- Inadequate transition planning and support can result in discontinuity of services, gaps in support, difficulties in navigating complex systems, and hindering their ability to pursue post-secondary education, gain employment, and live independently.

GUARDIANSHIP ISSUES- Guardianship issues often interfere with obtaining and maintaining competitive, integrated employment and independent living. The availability of supported decision-making alternatives, such as supported decision-making agreements or guardianship alternatives, may be limited. Aging family members and caregivers of persons with long-term care needs, such as individuals with I/DD or ASD, have critical need to address continuation of care. Many of these caregivers are aging in place in their own homes while acting as guardian for their adult child with a disability. The continuity of care is viewed as the responsibility of the primary caregiver, but there are major concerns about their becoming ill and dying in the future. Additionally, the availability of respite care services can be limited in Florida, especially for those who linger on the iBudget waiting list or who do not qualify for HCBS waiver services, leading to caregiver burnout and challenges in maintaining long-term care arrangements.

Employment

MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION- Concerns that influence hiring decisions and workplace inclusion often revolve around the perceived cost of insurance, the provision of job accommodations, and potential health and safety issues, including fears of reliability and absenteeism. Additionally, doubts about whether individuals with disabilities can or should participate in competitive, integrated employment settings persist, contributing to employment disparities. Stereotypes surrounding the capabilities of employees with disabilities further compound these challenges.

CHALLENGES WITH JOB PLACEMENT SUPPORT- Enhanced job placement support is essential, as employers often lack awareness of available programs, incentives, and accommodations for employees with disabilities. Additionally, the under-utilization of work incentives and programs like the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work is a concern. Tailoring job development to meet the diverse needs of various disability populations is necessary, along with improved benefits planning resources. Increasing the representation of individuals with disabilities in roles that influence employment policy and as role models can also be beneficial.

NEEDS TO SUPPORT PWD EMPLOYMENT- There is a lack of critical funding for ongoing, long-term on-the-job supports. Supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities requires addressing critical funding gaps for long-term support, particularly for those with physical disabilities or serious mental illness. It's also crucial to provide financial incentives for service providers to transition from facility-based programs to competitive, integrated employment options. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities need improved access to information and resources to gain a better understanding of their employment rights and legal protections.

INCOME THRESHOLD CAPS LIMIT INDIVIDUALS' ABILITY TO OBTAIN EMPLOYMENT OR ADVANCE- The issue of benefits cliffs poses a challenge for individuals with disabilities. With certain programs, as earned income surpasses certain thresholds, individuals with disabilities risk losing crucial government assistance programs such as SSI and Medicaid, which can inadvertently discourage them from seeking higher-paying jobs or pursuing financial independence. This situation can create a cycle of underemployment or unemployment, as individuals fear losing essential support. An obstacle in addressing this challenge is the shortage of certified benefits counselors, specifically Workforce Incentives Planning Assistance (WIPA) counselors, who can provide guidance and support to navigate the complexities of benefits counseling.

SUBMINIMUM WAGE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES- Subminimum wage employment can contribute to the continued segregation of individuals with disabilities in separate work environments. This practice perpetuates a cycle of low-wage employment for this population, limiting their opportunities for inclusion and financial independence. As discussed in earlier sections, Florida is working to eliminate subminimum wage employment, but it is yet to be seen whether those transitioning out of these positions are fully integrated into competitive employment or want to be employed in the community.

Community

HOUSING- Access to affordable and accessible housing for independent or supported living is a challenge for individuals with disabilities. Expanding affordable housing initiatives, promoting accessibility standards, and strengthening partnerships between housing agencies and disability service providers can help promote independence.

HOMEBOUND INDIVIDUALS- People with disabilities who cannot or choose not to work and/or participate in the community often face a range of issues that can significantly impact their quality of life including financial insecurity, social isolation, mental health challenges, and caregiver stress.

TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES- For Floridians with disabilities, transportation barriers often become significant roadblocks to their independence and inclusion. Limited accessible transportation options, inadequate infrastructure, and other barriers can hinder individuals' ability to access essential services, employment opportunities, and community activities. Daily hurdles which make it difficult for individuals with disabilities to travel independently include:

- Physical barriers, such as inadequate infrastructure, inaccessible public transportation stations, lack of accessible vehicles; lack of or inoperable lifts, elevators, and ramps; inadequate seating, signage, or audio announcements; and inconsistent maintenance of accessibility features.
- Limited transportation availability due to poorly developed or limited routes; or paratransit or specialized transportation programs with limited availability or restricted operating hours.
- Lack of information or awareness of transportation options, schedules and routes, and inadequate training on how to use assistive devices or interact with transportation providers hinders independent travel.
- Transportation providers may lack awareness and training on how to assist people with specific disabilities, or have negative attitudes or lack of sensitivity, which can create a hostile environment for individuals with disabilities.
- Transportation costs and affordability issues emerge since accessible transportation services often come at a higher cost than regular transportation options, a burden that can be particularly challenging for those with limited income and can affect their ability to secure and maintain employment.
- Individuals with disabilities may feel unsafe while using public transportation or other transportation options due to accessibility issues, harassment, or inadequate security measures.



CURRENT SYSTEMS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Early Years

The State Board of Education oversees the state's School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) programs. Within the Florida Department of Education, the Division of Early Learning (DEL) administers these and other early learning programs. In partnership with 30 early learning coalitions and the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, DEL delivers three programs: School Readiness, Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, and Child Care Resource and Referral. Each local Early Learning Coalition employs Inclusion Specialists to help serve children with disabilities and their families. Inclusion Specialists make connections for families to community services specific for children with disabilities.



The School Readiness Program (SR) offers financial assistance to low-income families for early education and care so they can become financially self-sufficient, and their young children can be successful in school in the future. VPK is a free educational program that prepares 4-year-olds for success in kindergarten and beyond. Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) is a network that helps families identify and select quality childcare options that best meet their needs.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is responsible for the licensing and credentialing of early learning providers.

Early Steps is Florida's early intervention system that offers services to eligible infants and toddlers, aged birth to 36 months, who have or are at-risk for developmental disabilities or delays. Early intervention supports families and caregivers to increase their child's participation in daily activities and routines that are important to the family. Fifteen Local Early Steps (LES) throughout the state receive referrals from various primary referral sources. Infants and toddlers are assessed in the following developmental domains to determine eligibility: physical, cognitive, communication, social-emotional and adaptive. Each child receives an Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP) that meets his or her unique needs. Families also receive support to develop the skills and confidence needed in helping their child learn and develop.

Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System (FDLRS) Child Find Specialists, in coordination with school districts, locate young children who are potentially eligible for services under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). FDLRS Child Find provides diagnostic screening, placement coordination, training, and support to parents of young children who have or are at risk of developing disabilities.

Help Me Grow Florida (HMGF) is an affiliate of the national Help Me Grow Network and is sponsored by the Children’s Forum and FDOE/Division of Early Learning. Help Me Grow promotes early identification of developmental, behavioral, and educational concerns, then links children and families to community-based services and supports at no cost to parents and caregivers. HMGF is designed to empower families and support their children’s healthy development through the implementation of four Core Components: Centralized Access Point; Family and Community Outreach; Child Healthcare Provider Outreach; and Data Collection and Analysis.

The FDOE/Blind Babies Program provides community-based early intervention education for children from birth through five years of age who are blind or visually impaired, and for their parents, families, and caregivers. An individualized plan for services is developed for each child which includes family support services; an Individualized Education Plan; and an Early Intervention Plan.

High School Transition Services

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that students who receive services under an individualized education program (IEP) also receive special education and related services and transition services that support a successful transition from the secondary to postsecondary space or workforce. Pre-employment transition and transition services are coordinated activities that are results-oriented, meaning that students are improving their academic and functional achievement to support post-secondary activities such as continuing into the workforce, academic education, integrated employment, or independent living. Students with an IEP begin their transition planning at age 12 in Florida to ensure transition services are in place by the time the student enters high school. These services may continue until the student reaches age 22.

Specifically, section 1003.5716, Florida Statutes, requires the IEP to include the student’s intent to pursue a standard high school diploma by the time the student reaches age 18 or, in the case of a deferment, by age 22. The IEP must also include, “appropriate measurable long-term post-secondary education and career goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, if appropriate, independent living skills and the transition services, including pre-employment transition services and courses of study needed to assist the student in reaching those goals”.

Each IEP includes appropriate school-based referrals to agencies such as Florida’s Center for Students with Unique Abilities, the Florida Centers for Independent Living, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and the Division of Blind Services. Federal law requires the student’s IEP to be reviewed by their IEP team on an annual basis to determine progress toward goal attainment and the extent to which any changes need to be made.

Broward College: Systems Mapping Project

The system that exists to assist persons with disabilities (PWD) in preparing for and entering the competitive workforce can pose complex, dynamic challenges that have a web of interconnected elements. The Able Trust is entering into a partnership beginning in January 2024 with Broward College to use a systems mapping analysis process to gain clarity about the system in Broward County that impacts students with disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary education and into the workforce. A systems analysis approach will reveal underlying patterns that may also pose challenges in other counties, identify opportunities to leverage the system, and better understand how to adapt as the system continues to change. This mapping analysis will provide a way to work toward a healthier, more accessible workforce development system for PWD and their families that can be replicated statewide.

Florida's commitment to enhancing transition services for students with disabilities is evident in the steps taken following the passage of House Bill 173 in 2021. This legislation prompted a thorough review of existing programs. In July 2022, FDOE published uniform best practices for service delivery related to employment, preemployment, and independent living skills. These best practices encompass five areas: increasing graduation outcomes; decreasing dropouts and increasing inclusion in general education; transition planning, assessment, curriculum and instruction; student involvement; family involvement; and interagency and community collaboration (Florida Department of Education, 2022).

To further enhance the effectiveness of high school transition services, it is crucial to promote the more uniform implementation of these best practices across schools and districts. Some notable examples of promising practices with the potential for wider adoption include:

- 1. Career and Technical Education (CTE):** Encouraging districts to utilize transition assessments to identify students' interests in CTE and aligning CTE programs with students' goals within their course of study.
- 2. Mentoring:** Expanding mentoring opportunities for a larger proportion of students with disabilities, providing valuable support and guidance.
- 3. Instructional Strategies and Student Support:** Leveraging community-based vocational education to support student learning and skill development.
- 4. Transition Assessment:** Employing multiple types of transition assessments with students and conducting these assessments annually to ensure ongoing progress monitoring.
- 5. Transition Events:** Organizing postsecondary education trips to Florida colleges and hosting transition fairs for students and their families to explore various opportunities.
- 6. Extended Transition Programs (ages 18-22):** Offering work-based learning environments for older students to gain valuable vocational experience.
- 7. Development of Community and Work Experiences:** Facilitating the creation of community and work experiences for students with disabilities, with district employees designated as job coaches, skills trainers, or employment advisors.
- 8. Dissemination of Information to Parents:** Widely sharing information with parents through resources like the Project 10 Website, publications, back-to-school events, college and career night events, and interagency fairs.
- 9. Transition Interagency Councils:** Promoting collaboration by inviting district ESE personnel and representatives from various agencies and organizations to participate in regular Interagency Council meetings.
- 10. Referral Processes to Agencies:** Implementing a systematic referral process to initiate Pre-Employment Transition Services when students are between the ages of 14 and 22.

These practices offer a comprehensive framework for improving transition services and empowering students with disabilities as they prepare for life beyond high school. By encouraging their widespread adoption, Florida can continue to make meaningful progress in supporting the diverse needs and goals of its students with disabilities.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Project 10

One resource to support youth with disabilities through their transition to adulthood is Project 10: Transition Education Network. This project receives funding from the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) within FDOE and is administratively housed at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. School districts that provide planning and transition services are the focus of Project 10. Additionally, Project 10 also serves as a collaborative resource for state agencies, discretionary projects, non-profits, and families.

Currently, Project 10 is centered around: capacity building to implement secondary transition services; interagency collaboration; transition legislation and policy including instruction on self-determination and the legal rights and responsibilities regarding the educational decisions that transfer to the student upon attaining the age of 18; and student development and outcomes. With these in mind, Project 10 develops and disseminates evidence-based practices and provides training and technical assistance to assist school districts and other stakeholders in building capacity to implement secondary transition (Project 10, 2023).

High School High Tech – *OVERVIEW AND PROGRAM OUTCOMES*

The Able Trust High School High Tech (HSHT) program provides high school students with all types of disabilities the opportunity to explore jobs and postsecondary education options that lead to in-demand careers. With 45 sites across Florida, HSHT links youth to a broad range of academic and career development resources and experiences that will help position them for future success. HSHT is a community-based partnership made up of students, parents and caregivers, businesses, educators and rehabilitation professionals.

HSHT goals are to increase the high school graduation rate and postsecondary enrollment rate of students with disabilities. HSHT has successfully reached these goals and helped prepare students for the workforce for more than 25 years.

HSHT programming is based on the national, evidence-based framework: *The Guideposts for Success* which include:

- School-Based Preparatory Experiences
- Career and Work-Based Preparatory Experiences
- Youth Leadership
- Community Connections
- Family Involvement
- Communication Skills



While in High School High Tech, students are given the opportunity to:

- Tour local businesses and industries to learn about in-demand careers.
- Visit colleges and universities to learn about educational opportunities after high school.
- Develop soft skills important to the workplace including how to communicate effectively, work as a team and think critically to solve problems.
- Learn by doing through participation in career experiences.
- Participate in the annual Project Venture competition in which teams prepare and present a comprehensive business plan to promote and sell a new product or service.

Florida students who participate in HSHT have a graduation rate of 99 percent compared to 88 percent for all Florida students with disabilities. HSHT graduates matriculate to post-secondary education and/or employment at a rate of 88 percent compared to 74 percent of all Florida graduates with disabilities. This school year (2023-24), The Able Trust is partnering with the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations (CFEF) to pilot an outgrowth of the HSHT program. This is an effort to increase the reach of the program and partner with more school districts, charter and private schools.

Project SEARCH

The Project SEARCH High School transition program is a one-year internship program for students with disabilities that takes place in a business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as acquisition of employability and marketable work skills. This project is a great example of blended and braided funding among multiple state agencies and organizations, as well as businesses and Florida school districts. The project continues to expand in Florida and leads the nation with a total of 41 sites. Florida's annual employment outcomes for Project SEARCH had an 84 percent completion rate and a 59.6 percent employment rate for the 2019-2020 reporting period. Although Florida's employment rate was down, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the employment rate exceeded the national average.

VR's "Project SEARCH" program helps students with disabilities in their last year of high school develop job skills. Almost 75 percent of people in this program get jobs. Thirty-four businesses across the state offer Project SEARCH.

All Project SEARCH employment outcomes meet the definition for competitive, integrated employment.

The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC), National Project SEARCH, RESPECT of Florida, and FDOE/VR are currently partnering to fund and pilot an adult model of Project SEARCH in four locations. In addition to supporting the planning, implementation, and staffing of these four new adult programs, the FDDC is sponsoring research by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) to evaluate the program. CCHMC researchers will measure interns' progress and outcomes in employment and self-sufficiency. The study will include surveys and focus groups with interns, families, instructors, skills trainers, host businesses, and interagency personnel to measure the efficacy of these four new adult Project SEARCH programs.

Results and recommendations of the pilots will not be available until the end of 2023. However, one challenge that has already been identified is the absence of a stable funding source for the classroom instruction component of the program. (In the high school model, school district partners fund the classroom instruction.) Models from other states are being reviewed for potential solutions.

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Programs

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 established a new program to support students with intellectual disabilities seeking the skills—academic, career, independent living—needed to prepare for gainful employment. The Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Program allows eligible students enrolling in Title IV-eligible postsecondary institutions to qualify for federal student aid, even if those students do not have a standard high school diploma or are not degree-seeking. Of note, Florida began a phase out the special diploma option for students with disabilities in the 2014-2015 school year (SY). SY 2022-23 was the first year the special diploma was not a reporting option for any Florida public school student with a disability.

Students with intellectual disabilities who enroll in approved CTP Programs are required to enroll with nondisabled students in credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing courses. Additionally, students participate in work-based learning or internship opportunities with nondisabled students. These students receive academic advising, student support services, and structured curricula to support their success in postsecondary coursework.

Florida public high schools and private schools that operate pursuant to section 1002.42, Florida Statutes, are encouraged to apply for resources to establish a Florida College and Career Transition Club (CCT Club). These clubs are designed for students in grades 9-12 from three groups: students with intellectual disabilities; students with disabilities other than intellectual disabilities; and students without disabilities. The program is structured such that all students participating in CCT Clubs collaborate to seek out information regarding college and career opportunities. Students are also engaged in mentoring, site visits, and activities and events designed to support the creation of college and career transition plans.

Students, families, and professionals who work with students with disabilities may benefit from College Matters, a collection of five one-hour conversations with secondary and postsecondary staff. These videos, which are available on the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities' website, focus on a variety of topics critical to achieving success in Florida postsecondary education. With funding from the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the videos include short presentations by experts along with discussion about strategies to support students with disabilities.

Postsecondary Student Disability Support Services

Florida's public postsecondary institutions provide equal opportunity for employment and educational opportunities to all applicants for employment, employees, applicants for admission, students and others without regard to race, color, national origin, age, religion, disability, marital status, sex, and any other factor protected under applicable federal, state, and local civil rights laws, rules and regulations.

Students with disabilities' IEP and Section 504 Plans expire after high school. Therefore, in order to receive services at the postsecondary level, students must self-disclose their disability, provide current documentation of their disability, and register with their college's student disability services office. This registration permits students to receive auxiliary aids and services, which may include extended time on exams, texts in an alternative format, note-takers, and sign language interpreters.

Florida Statutes also provide opportunity for students with documented disabilities to receive reasonable substitutions for:

- General admissions requirements. (section 1007.264, Florida Statutes)
- Graduation requirements. (section 1007.265, Florida Statutes)
- Admissions to a program of study/major. (section 1007.265, Florida Statutes)
- Entry into upper-division coursework. (section 1007.265, Florida Statutes)
- Specific coursework. (section 1007.265, Florida Statutes)

These requirements are further outlined for state universities in BOG 6.018, Substitution or Modification of Requirements for Program Admission, Undergraduate Transfer, and for Graduation by Students with Disabilities, and for school district career centers and FCS institutions in Rule 6A-10.041, F.A.C., Substitution for Requirements for Eligible Students with Disabilities at Florida Colleges and Postsecondary Career Centers.

Additionally, Florida operates several student aid programs including the Bright Futures Scholarship, which provides merit-based scholarships to eligible students pursuing academic or career education at one of Florida's public postsecondary institutions. Section 1009.41, Florida Statutes, provides that students with documented disabilities may enroll part-time and still receive financial aid that is otherwise reserved for students enrolled full time.

Career Education Programs

Under the Florida Department of Education, the Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs section is responsible for “developing and maintaining educational programs that prepare individuals for occupations important to Florida’s economic development.” As it relates to students with disabilities, the department identifies specific frameworks to ensure students with disabilities are engaged in career education and career services.

For secondary students who have an IEP or 504 plan, Career Education Services for Students with Disabilities offers specialized career education that include competencies in job preparation to prepare students for competitive employment in an occupation for which they have been trained. For postsecondary students, there are three specialized career education program options offered as clock hour instruction. These programs are individualized for each student and competency-based with integrated academic, technical, and problem-solving skills.

Blind Services Apprenticeship Program

The Department of Education’s Division of Blind Services has developed a registered apprenticeship program to create employment opportunities for blind and visually impaired individuals, training them to enhance website accessibility for internet users for all disabilities. The Department’s new Web Accessibility Specialist Registered Apprenticeship Program combines on-the-job training with educational instruction to progressively increase workers’ skill levels, wages and career options. Graduates will also receive internationally recognized portable credentials, and their training may be applied toward further post-secondary education. This program is the nation’s first web accessibility apprenticeship program developed by a state agency.

The Web Accessibility Specialist Registered Apprenticeship Program was created to provide another pathway into the Information Technology arena for blind and visually impaired clients served by DBS. Web Accessibility Specialists will review and evaluate websites to actively enhance or improve user accessibility and end-user experience, with specialization in accessibility for blind or visually impaired individuals. Web Accessibility Specialists may also contribute to the website design process, recommend user flows, collaboratively work with a larger team to troubleshoot accessibility errors, and fix accessibility compliance issues.

Apprentices selected into the program will serve as DBS employees and receive training at the DBS Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The competency-based apprenticeship is approximately 12-months.

Exemplary Postsecondary Programs

Signed into law on January 21, 2016, the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program Act (1004.6495 Florida Statutes) established the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities at the University of Central Florida (the Center) and charged the Center with managing the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program (FPCTP) application and approval process. The Act also established criteria for FPCTP approval, scholarship awards for eligible students to attend approved programs, grant awards to promote new program development and existing program enhancements, and accountability requirements associated with these opportunities.

As stated in the legislation, the purpose of the Act is to “increase independent living, inclusive and experiential postsecondary education, and employment opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities through degree, certificate, or nondegree programs and to establish statewide coordination of the dissemination of information regarding programs and services for students with disabilities. It is the intent of the Legislature that students with intellectual disabilities and students with disabilities have access to meaningful postsecondary education credentials and be afforded the opportunity to have a meaningful campus experience.”

The Center is working with higher education institutions across Florida to support implementation of the Act in three primary ways: (a) facilitate application and approval of their program that serves students with intellectual disabilities as a FPCTP, (b) provide scholarship awards to students attending an institution’s approved FPCTP, and (c) provide grant funding to foster starting up new and/or enhancing existing programs. These three components of the Center’s work aim directly at achieving the purpose of the ACT.

The Success for Occupational Area Readiness (SOAR) Program, an FPCTP and collaborative effort involving Lively Technical College, the Leon County School District, and various community partners, is an exemplary initiative designed to empower postsecondary students with documented intellectual disabilities to pursue independence and employment. Students enrolled in the SOAR program can choose from six different areas of study, including Automotive Service Technology; Building Trades & Construction Design Technology; Nails Specialty; Facial Specialty; Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning & Refrigeration; and Fundamental Foodservice Skills.

Within the SOAR program, students receive comprehensive support to ensure their academic and career success. They participate in on-campus academic coursework alongside their nondisabled peers. To facilitate their academic progress, SOAR students have access to various supports, including study sessions, reading assistance, assistive technology, and modified learning plans. These resources are instrumental in helping students excel in their chosen Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs of study.

Furthermore, the SOAR program recognizes the importance of addressing employment needs for its students. To this end, students are connected with Vocational Rehabilitation services, which can encompass employment planning, participation in paid and non-paid work-based learning opportunities, and access to career services such as resume writing, interview skills development, and job placement assistance.



The SOAR program exemplifies a holistic approach to postsecondary education for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It not only provides academic and disability support but also actively fosters a pathway to employment and independence, empowering students to achieve their goals and contribute to their communities.

Broward College's Seahawk NEST Academy is another exemplary FPCTP dedicated to empowering students with intellectual disabilities to achieve independence, self-advocacy, and essential life skills. This transformative "classroom-to-career" program is open to students aged 18 or older who possess a high school diploma or its equivalent. The program begins with comprehensive assessments to identify each student's goals and aspirations, and they are then placed into one of five distinct pathways, including STEM, business and industry, manufacturing, and construction.

The Seahawk NEST Academy spans three years and offers a multi-faceted support system to ensure students' holistic growth. This support network includes peer mentors, success coaches, dedicated faculty and staff, as well as the students' own personal support circles, cultivated through extracurricular activities. The first year of the program focuses on foundational courses provided by Broward College, concentrating on critical domains of adult living.

As students progress through the program, they gain access to valuable on-the-job training opportunities, receive essential soft skills training, and develop a robust resume during their third year. This culminates in the awarding of a Broward College Certificate of Professional Services upon program completion.

The Seahawk NEST Academy stands as an outstanding model for postsecondary education and transition programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It empowers students to achieve their fullest potential, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed for successful, fulfilling lives and careers. Through its commitment to holistic support and practical training, the program offers a blueprint for fostering independence and self-sufficiency among this student population.

FLORIDA'S PROMISING INITIATIVES & RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of robust legislation and policy surrounding a critical state initiative such as employment brings with it exciting opportunities and unique challenges, many that have been outlined earlier in this report. Florida's efforts around competitive minimum wage leads the country in its vision and purpose, with a system built for continuous strengthening based on experience and leadership. The following section highlights those areas in which Florida has improved the outcomes of employment for persons with disabilities over the past five years, and its ability to advocate for innovative change with both federal and state requirements to create a seamless system of exciting growth in support and delivery. By focusing on these legislative acts and existing efforts, we can continue this path toward fully realizing the contributions of all citizens and the state's overall economic growth.



Employment First

In 2018, a comprehensive review of Florida's Employment First system was conducted collaboratively by key stakeholders, including the Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities; and the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. The resulting report shows that Florida's stakeholders have undertaken significant efforts to enhance employment opportunities for all Floridians with disabilities. By fostering collaboration, identifying challenges and disparities within disability employment services, and aligning available workforce with labor market needs, Florida has leveraged its existing infrastructure for disability and employment. The state has devised action plans that address both inter- and intra-agency objectives, ensuring that any Floridian with a disability who seeks employment can achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Utilizing the High-Performing States Model as a framework for transformative actions, state agencies and organizations successfully established a state-level interagency coalition, fostered interagency cooperative agreements, and formulated an interagency plan. The report emphasizes several key elements of Florida's successful Employment First interagency collaboration:

- Multilevel leadership engagement, including collaborative teams at the local level.
- An extensive review of state policies and practices to pinpoint those that either facilitate or hinder integrated employment.
- Baseline employment outcome data collection for each participating agency or organization.
- A comprehensive set of services and strategies designed to advance the Employment First initiative, including:
 - The Abilities Work Web Portal and Help Desk.
 - The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program.
 - Local Level Employment First Collaborative Teams.
 - The Department of Financial Services' Financial Literacy Program for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities.
 - Workers' compensation laws that extend coverage to individuals with disabilities participating in state-sponsored on-the-job training.

Florida's current Employment First Interagency Agreement remains in effect until June 30, 2024. This agreement serves as the foundational framework for outlining the roles and responsibilities of state agencies and organizations, as well as establishing specific objectives for the interagency cooperative agreement. These objectives encompass the following key components:

1. **Leadership Commitment:** The agreement solidifies the commitment of leadership within state agencies and organizations to pool resources and coordinate efforts effectively, with the overarching goal of enhancing employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities who rely on publicly funded services.
2. **Strategic Goals and Benchmarks:** Partners are tasked with collaboratively developing strategic goals and measurable benchmarks that guide the implementation of the agreement, ensuring a structured and goal-oriented approach.
3. **Financing and Contracting Methods:** The agreement emphasizes the need to identify financial and contracting methods that prioritize employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities through state agencies and organizations.
4. **Training Integration:** Partners are required to establish methods for integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce effectively, including training programs that equip them with the necessary skills and resources.
5. **Collaborative Efforts:** Collaborative efforts among multiple agencies are essential to achieving the objectives of the act, promoting synergy and shared responsibility.
6. **Service Innovations:** The agreement encourages the exploration and promotion of innovative service approaches to better support individuals with disabilities in their workplace endeavors.
7. **Accountability Measures:** To ensure the sustainability of the agreement, accountability measures are to be identified and implemented, enabling ongoing assessment and improvement.

In order to fully maximize the efforts of the Employment First partners, more work along these lines must be done to align policies, regulatory guidance, and reimbursement structures to promote and support competitive integrated employment as Florida's priority of publicly funded day and employment services. This requires a long-term commitment with funded support for coordination, facilitation, and measurement efforts.

Long-term strategic and annual action plans for achieving the specified criteria should be developed, implemented, and measured. We recommend that Florida's Employment First partners adopt uniform performance criteria, like those established by the National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD).

Critically, the partners should establish uniform employment outcome data and set targets for improvement. The metric can encompass various employment outcomes, including competitive or gainful employment. To provide a more detailed assessment, it can be further subdivided into categories such as competitive integrated employment, non-integrated employment, and sub-minimum wage employment. This breakdown is particularly valuable for agencies aiming to reduce the number of individuals engaged in non-integrated or sub-minimum wage work arrangements.

Florida benefits from an array of transition services at the K-12 level, and a coordinated effort around workforce development education and training at the post-secondary level. Since Florida's Employment First is modeled after a national systems-change framework, there is an opportunity to leverage the state's leadership with insights from other states.

A review of annual Employment First reports from various states validates much of the work that has already taken place. To strengthen Florida's position, the state should continue to build upon the common themes identified in other state initiatives. These themes include enhancing awareness and communication regarding post-secondary education and employment resources, providing employer-centric support and resources for individuals with disabilities, and increasing awareness of resources related to transportation, housing, and benefits/medical assistance planning services.

Some specific strategies that can be considered, drawn from the multi-state review, include the development of cross-agency strategic plans aimed at creating a comprehensive workforce development system; the establishment of unique identifier systems bridging the gap between K-12 and post-secondary education and employment; the centralization of data, reporting, and information on an interagency portal for streamlined service access, reporting, and follow-up; as well as the creation of professional learning collaboratives to provide support for both individuals with disabilities and employer staff.



REACH

In June 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 1507 into law, establishing the Reimagining Education and Career Help (REACH) Act. The REACH Office was established to support an innovative, system-wide approach to workforce development and education in Florida to create opportunities for meaningful employment and economic freedom for all Floridians, including Floridians with disabilities.

Senate Bill 240, passed in 2023, reinforces the consumer-first, “no-wrong-door” approach, emphasizing the need to upskill and engage individuals with disabilities and the agencies that serve and support them and their families. State workforce partners are working to connect integrated data systems to ensure all Floridians have access to a customer portal with a common intake form to serve as a data hub that provides a one-stop-shop of full services. The REACH Office plays a vital role in the important work of aligning education and workforce systems to ensure skills and training align with, and translate into, accessible workforce opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Coordination with other state agencies responsible for serving individuals with disabilities should continue to be a priority for the REACH Office.

The REACH Act and SB 240 work together to position Florida to be able to continue to emphasize quality training for persons with disabilities. Moving forward, state agencies should work together to address any remaining systemwide incongruencies preventing access to solutions and services to CIE for individuals with disabilities. The State of Florida should seek to identify additional opportunities, in the spirit of the REACH Act, to increase the economic mobility of individuals with disabilities. Specifically, state partners should further prioritize the identification of credentials that lead to competitive integrated employment (CIE). Incentives should be created so that public school districts, colleges, and universities will offer these types of training and educational programs that result in the student earning a credential that leads to CIE.

The REACH Act mandated the establishment of criteria for assigning letter grades to local workforce development boards. The REACH Office, as directed by the law, developed and approved these criteria, which were adopted by the CareerSource Florida Board of Directors on September 12, 2022. The criteria included existing accountability measures and introduced some new ones outlined by statute. The measures included metrics around persons with disabilities and adult learners under WIOA Titles II and IV, and letter grades will be added this year. Moving forward, Florida should consider how to further prioritize the performance and funding measures of the local workforce development boards, with a focus on upskilling and reskilling individuals with disabilities.

To further bolster the system change efforts outlined in the REACH Act for individuals with disabilities, the following opportunities should be considered:

1. **Invest in Multivariate Correlational Research:** Allocate resources to invest in high-quality multivariate correlational research aimed at understanding the return on investment that the State of Florida achieves through its disability education programs. This research should identify best practices and strategies for enhancing transition services and guiding youth from school to Competitive Integrated Employment.

2. **Web-Based Training for Workforce Personnel:** State of Florida should pursue a comprehensive web-based training program for all employment services personnel working within the state workforce system, particularly those interacting with businesses and individuals with disabilities, so that all workforce system employment services personnel are qualified to deliver high-quality services to employers and individuals with disabilities, with a specific focus on those with I/DD and significant disabilities.
3. **Career Planning and Analytics Systems:** Develop the State of Florida's career planning systems to expand access to serve individuals with disabilities and ensure that online systems allow individuals with disabilities to develop individualized career plans that emphasize CIE and long-term economic self-sufficiency objectives.

FL WINS

The Workforce System Integration initiative, known as “FL WINS,” represents a significant step towards establishing a consumer-focused workforce system in Florida. This system aims to improve coordination among various workforce partners, enhancing accessibility to education and training resources, labor market information, career planning tools, and support services for individuals with disabilities. The goal is to ensure that individuals can access these services seamlessly, regardless of which entry point they use within the workforce or education system.

Key components and intentions of FL WINS include:

1. **Alignment and Coordination:** The initiative seeks to align and coordinate Florida's workforce development system, fostering better collaboration among stakeholders. This collaborative approach is in line with the REACH Act's vision for improved coordination.
2. **No-Wrong-Door Entry Strategy:** FL WINS aims to establish a “no-wrong-door” entry strategy, allowing individuals with disabilities to access services from any workforce partner through a common intake form and case management system. This approach streamlines the process and ensures that individuals can find the support they need more easily.
3. **Data Sharing:** FL WINS facilitates data sharing agreements among state agencies, enabling the efficient exchange of workforce data. This data sharing can help inform decision-making and improve service delivery.

Ultimately, the aim of comprehensive case management within FL WINS is to create a supportive environment, break down old and stressful structures, and empower individuals with disabilities to thrive in both their professional and personal lives. FL WINS can enhance its effectiveness in serving individuals with disabilities, by leveraging the existing case management tools, offering tailored support, promoting career development, enhancing public message materials, and fostering collaboration among workforce partners to create a more inclusive and accessible workforce system.

Guardianship

The Florida Developmental Disability Council has laid out a comprehensive framework for its 5-Year Plan, aimed at addressing the evolving needs of aging caregivers and their adult family members with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). The plan encompasses several key initiatives and strategies to ensure the well-being and support of this population, including:

- 1. Interagency Collaboration:** The first step involves developing an interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that brings together all relevant state agencies involved in needs assessment, eligibility determination, and care provision for aging caregivers and adults with I/DD. This collaborative approach enhances coordination and resource sharing among agencies.
- 2. Cross-Network Training:** Promoting cross-network training for service providers and case managers fosters a more informed and capable workforce, ensuring that they can effectively address the unique needs of aging caregivers and individuals with I/DD.
- 3. Infrastructure Expansion:** Identifying and addressing the challenges associated with expanding agency infrastructure to accommodate increased clientele due to the elimination of waiting lists is essential. This includes considerations for appropriate compensation and training of staff.
- 4. Aging Caregiver Planning:** Developing a plan for aging caregivers emphasizes creative housing solutions and appropriate supports to cater to aging families. Exploring payment models, such as stipends based on successful models like the Florida Home Care for the Elderly, can enhance personal care services.
- 5. Maximizing Medicaid:** Leveraging federal funding opportunities under Medicaid can strengthen community-based direct service delivery systems and promote deinstitutionalization, aligning with the goal of supporting individuals in integrated settings.
- 6. Future Planning:** Encouraging future and advanced planning by aging caregivers through training and guidance provided by case managers ensures that families are well-prepared and aware of available resources for long-term planning.
- 7. Information Sharing:** Encouraging the sharing of client information across state agencies enhances administrative efficiency and promotes a more holistic approach to care and support.
- 8. Legislative Commission:** Proposing the establishment of a Florida Legislative Commission on Aging Caregivers and Families can facilitate comprehensive planning for increased housing, healthcare, and community service needs in the near future.



9. **Policy Revisions:** Identifying and revising policies that break down the silos between aging and developmental disabilities services, while expanding case management for families and individuals with disabilities, to ensure more inclusive and comprehensive care.
10. **Funding for Changing Needs:** Developing and securing funding for projects supported by relevant agencies, including the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, and the Agency for Health Care Administration, is vital to meet the evolving needs of older caregivers with adult family members with developmental disabilities.

This comprehensive framework underscores the commitment of the Florida Developmental Disability Council to improve the lives of aging caregivers and individuals with I/DD, ensuring they receive the support and services needed to thrive within their communities.

Across the Country

The Center for Health Care Strategies has been actively collaborating with 14 states to implement key strategies aimed at supporting family caregivers. These strategies encompass various facets:

1. **Leveraging New Technologies:** Strengthening family caregivers' capacity by harnessing the power of new technologies to provide assistance and support.
2. **Enhancing Access to Respite Care:** Expanding access to respite care services to offer caregivers temporary relief from their caregiving responsibilities.
3. **Formal Training for Caregivers:** Increasing opportunities for formal training and education for family caregivers to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed for effective caregiving.
4. **Cross-Sector Partnerships:** Building formal partnerships and strategies that span across different sectors, including aging, housing, transportation, health plans, and developmental disabilities, to provide comprehensive support to family caregivers.

One notable success story emerges from Virginia's Department of Medical Assistance, where cross-agency collaboration has enabled the sharing of data related to service utilization by Medicaid enrollees. This collaborative effort has streamlined eligibility determination and assessments, reducing duplication of efforts.

Similarly, Iowa has developed a uniform family caregiver assessment tool for Area Agencies on Aging, promoting consistency and effectiveness in assessing the needs of caregivers.

Additionally, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has recognized successful state efforts to establish intentional partnerships and enhance person-centered counseling for individuals with developmental disabilities and their family caregivers.

Georgia has successfully implemented a statewide Aging and Disability Resource Center Advisory Council, bringing together representatives from various agencies and organizations to share data and collaborate on demographic and assessment information, enhancing the coordination of services.

FEDERAL & STATE LAWS

AND RULES THAT IMPACT OR LIMIT SUPPORTS OR SERVICES FOR PWD

At both the federal and state level, there are statutes, rules, policies and regulations that are most often written to reduce barriers and promote equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Federal Acts

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**, the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, and the **Fair Housing Act** at the federal level were enacted over time to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all settings, including employment.

The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, is a comprehensive federal policy designed to enhance the nation's workforce development system, particularly for "individuals with barriers to employment," including individuals with disabilities.

The **Administration for Community Living (ACL)** is the federal agency focused on ensuring that individuals with disabilities of all ages are able to live where they choose, with the people they choose, and with the opportunity to participate fully in their communities. The ACL oversees the Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act appropriations, which are distributed to each state based on a formula to implement Developmental Disabilities (DD) Councils (i.e., planning and coordinating), University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (i.e., research), and protection and advocacy (i.e., civil rights).

Florida

In Florida, several critical laws, rules, and resources are in place to extend protections in federal legislation or to minimize barriers to access, prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities, enhance the livelihood of individuals with disabilities, and address accessibility in such areas as education, technology, transportation, mental health, civil rights, and workforce participation.

The **Florida Civil Rights Act of 1992** is meant to secure for all individuals within the state, including those with a disability, freedom from discrimination. Among other provisions under the FCRA, it is unlawful to discriminate against individuals with disabilities in employment, housing, and public accommodations. The Act prohibits employers from engaging in discriminatory practices, such as refusing employment, termination, or denial of reasonable accommodations based on disability status. It also ensures equal access to public accommodations, such as restaurants, stores, and transportation services, by mandating reasonable modifications and removing barriers. The FCRA mirrors and complements federal laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, by providing additional protections and remedies at the state level. It empowers individuals with disabilities to assert their rights, seek redress for discrimination, and promotes inclusive environments where they can fully participate and contribute.

The **Florida Mental Health Act** and the **Marchman Act** were passed to support Floridians with disabilities dealing with mental illness and substance abuse. It is the intent of the Legislature for these two laws to be implemented by the Department of Children and Families and other departments/agencies in coordination with each other depending on the circumstances of need to evaluate, research, plan, and implement programs designed to reduce the occurrence, severity, duration, and disabling aspects of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders and substance use and addiction abuse, as it impacts home, community, and the workplace.

The Florida Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) implements the **Developmental Disabilities Waiver Program** and often acts in concert with school-based supports for eligible children and youth. The waiver program allows funds that would be typically allocated to institutional care to be used for home and community-based services specific to health support needs. Through the **Developmental Disabilities Individual Budgeting (iBudget) Waiver**, eligible individuals of any age receive a range of services tailored to their unique needs and includes such things as residential supports, behavioral therapies, vocational training, respite care for primary caregivers, and assistance with daily living activities. The iBudget waiver is designed to make funding the process fair and equitable for all Medicaid recipients on the Developmental Disabilities Waivers and provide more opportunities for recipients to direct their own care, choosing services that matter most for their unique circumstances and the flexibility to respond to changing needs.

Programs designed to support infants and children with disabilities include the **Blind Babies Program, Early Steps, and Child Find** through the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (a discretionary project through the Florida Department of Education) so that early identification and intervention might mitigate limiting effects of a disability.

The **Florida Employment First Act** is modeled after a national systems-change framework centered on the premise that all individuals, including those individuals with the most significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) and community life. The general purpose of the initiative “is to prioritize employment of individuals with disabilities and to change the employment system to better integrate individuals with disabilities into the workforce. This act encourages collaborative efforts between state agencies and organizations to achieve better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.” The Florida law mandates coordination of publicly financed systems; encourages the alignment of policies, regulatory guidance, and reimbursement structures; and calls for an interagency cooperative agreement among certain state agencies and disabilities service organizations to ensure a long-term commitment to improving employment of persons with disabilities. The following are current partners in the interagency cooperative agreement: **Florida Department of Education’s Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS), Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Florida Division of Blind Services (DBS); Florida Department of Commerce** (formerly the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity); **Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD); CareerSource Florida; Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF),**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Office; Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. (FDDC); Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities; and The Arc of Florida. Information and resources are maintained on the Employment First Florida website at www.employmentfirstfl.org, including accountability measures to ensure the sustainability of the agreement.

In 2021, the Florida Legislature passed the **REACH Act: Reimagining Education and Career Help**, sometimes known by its central tenant of “no wrong door.” It is aimed at bringing a more inclusive and integrated approach to how the state trains for the future of work today. The REACH Act is a significant policy initiative aimed at improving education and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and seeks to empower through comprehensive support and resources. It promotes inclusive education practices that facilitate the successful transition from school to post-secondary education or employment and emphasizes the importance of individualized planning, collaboration between educational institutions and employers, and the integration of work-based learning experiences. Through the REACH Act, individuals with disabilities gain access to vocational rehabilitation services, career counseling, and innovative educational programs designed to enhance their employability and independence. The Act also encourages the development of partnerships between educational institutions, businesses, and disability organizations to foster seamless transitions and promote competitive integrated employment opportunities.

The **Florida Workforce Integrated Networking Systems (FL WINS) Program** is responsible for the development and implementation of the consumer-first workforce system. The FL WINS Program is a collaborative effort between the REACH Office, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, Florida Department of Children and Families, Florida Department of Education, and CareerSource Florida, who together are referred to as workforce partner agencies.

The **Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged** is an advisory group responsible for improving transportation accessibility for individuals with disabilities, older adults, and individuals with low incomes. This commission examines the challenges faced by certain populations and provides recommendations to enhance transportation services and ensure equal access.

The **Florida Assistive Technology Act**, an extension of the federal Assistive Technology Act, is designed to enhance the availability and use of assistive technology for individuals with disabilities as a way to strengthen the experience that an individual would have in the workspace or public square and to promote independence, inclusion, and improved quality of life for individuals with disabilities in Florida. The **Florida Alliance for Assistive Services & Technology (FAAST)** supports this act by increasing access to assistive technology through collaboration with individuals with disabilities, their families, educators, governments, business, and community stakeholders.

The use of **service animals for Floridians with disabilities** is an extension of the Americans with Disabilities Act to outline the rights and responsibilities of an individual with a disability and the use of a service animal, and prohibited discrimination in public employment, public accommodations, and housing accommodations.

RESPECT of Florida is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization designated by the Florida Department of Management Services and operating by the **Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities** to administer Florida's State Use Program. This program provides governmental agencies within Florida quality products and services produced by individuals with varying degrees of disability thereby helping to employ Florida citizens with disabilities, reducing their dependence on welfare, and preventing the need for costly institutionalization. RESPECT products and services span technologies and industries and provide a wide array of training opportunities for Floridians with disabilities.

There are 15 **Centers for Independent Living (CILs)** in the State of Florida and three satellite offices. CILs are a one-stop resource for Floridians of all ages and disability types. Their collective goal is to assist individuals with disabilities with independent living in their community of choice by providing an array of services, including advocacy, information and referral, peer support, skills training, community transitions and diversion from nursing homes and institutions, and transitions supports from the K-12 public school system. CILs also engage in their communities to work with partners to make the community more accessible and inclusive to all disabilities and are unique in that a majority of their board and staff members are individuals with disabilities.

HOPE FLORIDA, originally designed to empower Floridians on their path to prosperity and self-sufficiency, has expanded its mission to support individuals with disabilities through the Pathway to Possibilities initiative. This program, led by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, offers the expertise of dedicated Hope Navigators to assist individuals with disabilities and their families. These Hope Navigators work closely with participants to help them achieve their goals, overcome obstacles, navigate government services, and cultivate a robust support network within their local communities. The program also facilitates connections with various community-based providers, including nonprofits, faith-based organizations, peer support networks, and private sector businesses, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can access a comprehensive array of resources and opportunities.

The **Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program** was created to assist in designating a business entity as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner if the business demonstrates commitment, through employment or support, to the independence of individuals who have a disability. Implementation is a coordinated public-private effort in conjunction with program services provided by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation of the Department of Education, the Division of Blind Services of the Department of Education, and CareerSource Florida, Inc.

The Florida legislature passed the **Florida Achieving a Better Life Experience Act** in 2015. This law establishes ABLE United to oversee the state of Florida's qualified ABLE program. This program offers tax-free savings and investment options to encourage individuals with a disability and their families to save private funds to support health, independence, and quality of life.

The **Florida Endowment for Vocational Rehabilitation**, operating under the dba of **The Able Trust**, is a direct support organization to the state's vocational rehabilitation program. The Able Trust uses research to better understand and support Florida's disability employment systems and stakeholders.

EMPLOYMENT FIRST COORDINATION CHART

The five-year Interagency Cooperative Agreements (i.e., 2014 and 2019), state that Employment First partners are “fully committed to working together to improve the number and percentage of growth in competitive employment for individuals with disabilities.” The general purpose of the agreement is to provide a framework for a long-term commitment to improving employment outcomes for Floridians with disabilities. The agreement outlines specific roles and responsibilities along with the following objectives:

- Establishing a commitment by the leadership of the agencies and organizations to maximize resources and coordination to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities who seek publicly funded services;
- Developing strategic goals and benchmarks to assist the agencies and organizations in implementing the agreement;
- Identifying financing and contracting methods that will help to prioritize employment for individuals with disabilities;
- Establishing training methods to better integrate individuals with disabilities into the workforce;
- Ensuring collaborative efforts between multiple agencies to achieve the purposes of the act;
- Promoting service innovations to better assist individuals with disabilities in the workplace;
- and State level stakeholders continued to meet regularly, and the Grassroots Group meets quarterly via webinars.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director's Office • Office of the Chief of Staff • Division of Budget and Planning • Division of Operations • Division of Programs • Office of Information Technology • Office of Inspector General • Office of Performance and Accountability 	<p>Administers the Developmental Disability iBudget waiver program, two Developmental Disability Centers, the Developmental Disabilities Defendant Program and the Consumer-Directed Care Plus program. The Division of Programs is comprised of the following three bureaus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Program Development, Compliance and Quality Management</i> which is primarily responsible for coordinating with AHCA on the preparation and submission of waivers to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services • <i>Consumer-Directed Care Plus</i> oversees the Medicaid State Plan Amendment enables states to offer a self-directed service delivery model for personal assistance services as a state plan option, by allowing iBudget waiver enrollees to directly hire workers and vendors to help with daily care needs such as personal care, respite, and transportation. • <i>State-Operated Facilities</i> operates two developmental disability centers for people who need structured care 24 hours a day 	<p>APD has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • The Florida Development Disabilities Council • FDOE, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation • Transition Success Network as required in HB1517 to create a continuum of guidance & information for individuals with developmental disabilities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FDOE/VR - FDOE, Division of Adult Education - 3 Local School Districts (Orange, Collier, Leon) - Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities - Florida Dept. of Children and Families - Florida Dept. of Health, Early Steps Program - Project 10 - Florida Dept. of Commerce, Unique Abilities Program • Dept. of Commerce and Dept. of Revenue – wage data sharing agreement • Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA) 	<p>In order to be eligible for services APD, an individual must have a developmental disability (as defined in section 393.063(12), Florida Statutes), which occurs prior to age 18 and constitutes a substantial handicap that can reasonably be expected to continue indefinitely. Disabilities served by APD include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual disabilities (Full Scale IQ of 70 or below) • Severe forms of autism • Spina bifida cystica or myelomeningocele • Cerebral palsy • Prader-Willi syndrome • Down syndrome • Phelan-McDermid syndrome or • Individuals between the ages of 3-5 at high risk for a developmental disability

APD	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	50,862	51,282	56,177	52,190	53,289	54,764	59,735	61,110	62,384
# Competitively Employed	3,188	3,208	3,075	2,485	2,367	2,837	2,957	1,922	2,410
# Employed in Subminimum Wage	15,940 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	14,376 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	13,208 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	13,794 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	16,273 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	16,493 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	16,088 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	54,764* (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)	15,972 (Number in Day Services ADT & SE only)

Sources: Annual Reports to ICI State Data; Annual APD Long-Range Program Plan; APD Monthly Data Reports.

* The reduction in numbers from previous years is due to data collection changes from implementing a new client data management system for the agency. More accuracy is expected in next year's report.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) BEESS is a bureau within FDOE, Division of Public Schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office of the Bureau Chief Instructional Support Services (ISS) Student Support Services Bridge Unit Dispute Resolution and Monitoring (DRM) Program Accountability, Assessment & Data Systems (PAADS) 	Administers programs for students with disabilities, coordinates exceptional student services throughout the state, and participates in multiple inter-agency efforts designed to strengthen the quality and variety of services available to eligible students with disabilities.	BEESS has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment First FDOE/VR FDOE/DBS 	Students are eligible for services if they found, through a school district evaluation, to have a disability as defined in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and require special education services or accommodations.

BEESS	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	20,996	18,337	19,984	19,474	19,680	19,646	19,440	17,800	18,363	14,335	16,759
# Competitively Employed	2,407	2,140	2,757	2,930	2,893	3,143	5,104	5,242	5,025	5,135	6,430
# in other employment (not defined)	1,709	1,648	1,874	1,883	1,842	2,036	1,128	1,029	977	756	701

Source: Employment First Annual Reports

Agency & Operational Structure	Services
<p>Florida Department of Education, Division of Blind Services (DBS)</p> <p>DBS is a division within Florida Department of Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office of the Director • Bureau of Client Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Blind Babies Program - Children's Program - Vocational Rehabilitation Program Including Pre-Employment Transition Services - Independent Living Program • Bureau of Business Enterprise Program • Bureau of Braille and Talking Book Library • Career, Technology, and Training Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired 	<p>Blind Babies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based early-intervention education to children from birth through five years of age <p>Children's Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides education services to children who are blind from five years of age through transition to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Supplements services already offered by the school system to foster the child's learning and ability to function independently. <p>Vocational Rehabilitation Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists individuals with disabilities in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining employment. The goal of vocational rehabilitation is to help individuals with disabilities achieve greater independence, self-sufficiency, and integration into the workforce. <p>Independent Living Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services to enable individuals who are blind or severely visually impaired to live more independently in their homes and communities with a maximum degree of self-direction. <p>Business Enterprise Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides job opportunities in the food service sector for eligible blind persons under the Randolph-Sheppard Act. Job opportunities include: Snack Bar, Cafeteria, Highway Vending Machines, or Non-Highway Vending <p>Braille and Talking Book Library</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides information and reading materials needed by individuals who are unable to use standard print because of a visual, physical, or reading disability. <p>Rehabilitation Center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides instruction in a variety of independence skills, case management, technology and adaptive equipment training, college preparation, job readiness, adaptation to blindness and skills that contribute to independence and employment.

Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>DBS has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • FDOE, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation • Florida Required Partners under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) including CSF and FDOE/VR • Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind (FAASB) • The Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind • FDOE/BEES 	<p>Blind Babies and Children’s Programs</p> <p>A child must have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bilateral visual impairment which, with best correction for that individual, constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to the child’s ability to learn, or function independently, or to become employed; and • A reasonable expectation that services may benefit the child and family in terms of education, independence, and transition. <p>Pre-employment Transition, Transition Services, and Vocational Rehabilitation Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals must have a visual impairment in both eyes and require vocational rehabilitation services to obtain, maintain, or retain an employment outcome. <p>Independent Living Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An adult must have a visual impairment in both eyes and require services to improve or maintain their independence at their home and community. <p>Business Enterprise Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An individual must be legally blind, • Be a client of the Florida Division of Blind Services, • Be at least 18 years of age, • Be a United States citizen, • Have a high school diploma or GED, • Pass a physical exam, • Submit to and pass a Level 2 Criminal Background Screening, • Successfully complete Florida Business Enterprise training and licensing requirements. <p>Braille and Talking Book Library</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be a Florida resident who is unable to use standard print as the result of visual, physical, or reading disabilities. <p>Rehabilitation Center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be an eligible consumer of a DBS program (VR, Transition, Independent Living, Business Enterprise)

DBS	2011-2012	2012-2013	2012-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017 - 2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served (Employment Program Customers)	5,313	5,241	5,225	5,203	5,227	5,232	4,903	4,854	4,984	4,923	4,999	5,012
# Competitively Employed (Successful Employment Closures)	729	700	713	761	840	855	852	888	822	890	942	921
Average Hourly Wage	\$12.12	\$13.88	\$13.04	\$14.34	\$14.34	\$14.49	\$14.73	\$14.64	\$16.85	\$16.90	\$16.56	\$18.73

Source: DBS case management system (AWARE)

Please note that the data for # Competitively Employed aligns with the data reported by DBS. We found flaws in this line of data within the 2019-2020 Employment First Annual Report that was published.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)</p> <p>VR is a division within Florida Department of Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office of the Director <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bureau of Field Services - Bureau of Compliance & Quality Assurance - Bureau of Information Technology - Bureau of Vendor & Contracted Services 	<p>VR assists individuals with disabilities in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining employment. The goal of vocational rehabilitation is to prepare individuals with disabilities to achieve greater independence, self-sufficiency, and providing education and training that lead to integration into the workforce. The division manages many programs related to employment and independent living including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-Employment Transition Services • Adult Vocational Rehabilitation Services • Independent Living Services • Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf/Blind Services • Supported Employment • Ticket to Work (for recipients of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Income) • Self-Employment Services • Career Counseling Information and Referral Services for subminimum wage 14(c) employers. • ArtCIE – federal grant to encourage individuals in subminimum wage jobs or those considering subminimum to pursue competitive integrated employment (CIE) 	<p>VR has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • Agency for Persons with Disabilities • FDOE, Division of Blind Services • Florida Required Partners under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) including CSF and FDOE/DBS • FDOE/Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Support (FDOE/BEES) • Florida Dept. of Children & Families, Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (FDCF/SAMH) • Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technologies (FAAST) • The Florida Rehabilitation Council • Florida Independent Living Council • The Able Trust • APD Transition Success Network (HB 1517) 	<p>To be eligible for VR services, an individual must have a disability and requires vocational rehabilitation services to prepare for, enter, engage in, or retain gainful employment. Individuals determined to have a disability as determined by other state or federal agencies, such as Social Security, may be used.</p>

VR	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	50,026	57,004	53,141	39,207	42,099	45,887	46,323	48,516	49,661
# Competitively Employed	6,071	6,523	7,214	5,760	5,194	5,975	4,751	5,924	5,389
Average Hourly Wage	\$10.86	\$10.98	\$11.15	\$11.38	\$11.44	\$11.91	\$11.94	\$12.12	\$12.07

Source: VR's Rehabilitation Information Management System. (RIMS)

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>Department of Children and Families, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Program Office (SAMH)</p> <p>SAMH is an office within the Florida Department of Children and Families</p>	<p>SAMH is responsible for the oversight of a statewide system of care for the prevention, treatment, and recovery of children and adults with serious mental illnesses or substance abuse disorders. SAMH is responsible for planning, managing and evaluating a statewide program of mental health services and supports, including community programs, crisis services, state residential treatment facilities, and children's mental health services.</p> <p>Provides for various treatment options including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treatment for Substance Abuse • Adult Mental Health • Children's Mental Health • State Mental Health Treatment Facilities 	<p>DCF/SAMH has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • Collaborative for increasing Individual Placement Support services including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FDOE/VR - Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration, Medicaid Statewide Medicaid Managed Care Program - CareerSource FL • APD Transition Success Network (HB 1517) 	<p>Substance Abuse Eligibility:</p> <p>SAMH provides treatment for substance abuse for adolescents and adults affected by substance misuse, abuse or dependence.</p> <p>SAMH provides mental health services for people in crisis, people with serious, disabling or potentially disabling mental illnesses who live in the community, who cannot otherwise access mental health care, and certain people with serious mental illnesses who get involved with the criminal justice system.</p>

DCF, SAMH	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	233,518	322,173	327,423	303,768	309,451	316,299	339,093	248,322
# Competitively Employed (Total Persons Receiving Employment Services)	1,078	1,287	1,747	1,934	2,341	2,081	3,602	1,485

Source: Employment First Annual Reports

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC)</p> <p>The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council is an advisory board, established under the federal Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act, 2000.</p> <p>FDDC is governed by the board which is appointed by the Governor and made up of individuals with developmental disabilities, family members, and other stakeholders.</p> <p>FDDC has an Executive Director and a team of staff who coordinate special projects and grants related to its 5-Year State Plan.</p>	<p>FDDC affects policy and services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families and their supports through education, advocacy and partnerships. FDDC funds special projects and initiatives related to research, education, advocacy, policy, and legislative action that enhance the quality of life, inclusion, and self-determination of individuals with developmental disabilities.</p>	<p>CSF has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities 	<p>FDDC sponsored programs are for children and adults who live with disabilities which are attributable to intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, autism, spina bifida, Down syndrome, Phelan-McDermid syndrome, or Prader-Willi syndrome; that manifests before the age of 18; and that constitutes a substantial handicap that can reasonably be expected to continue indefinitely.</p>

FDDC	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	164	159	223	250	235
# Competitively Employed	78	137	249	248	168	119	110	144	180	140
Average Hourly Wage	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	\$9.59	\$9.75	\$10.22

Source: Program Performance Report

Please note that the 2019-20 Employment First Annual Report omitted the 2017-18 data. Also, please note that the FDDC number employed in the 2017-18 Easy Read Employment First Annual Report should have been 144, rather than 110.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities (Florida ARF)</p> <p>Florida ARF is a 501 (c) (3) public education institution and trade association.</p> <p>It is governed by a board of directors made up of its member organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President & CEO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations - Finance - RESPECT of Florida 	<p>Florida ARF is a statewide, professional industry association that provides advocacy, information, and networking for individuals with disabilities and the community agencies that serve them.</p> <p>Florida ARF has operational and oversight responsibilities for RESPECT of Florida which is the central nonprofit agency for the State of Florida and works with nonprofit organizations around the state to employ persons with disabilities in the production of products and services that are sold to state and local government agencies.</p>	<p>Florida ARF has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First 	<p>Member agencies of Florida ARF serve eligible individuals of many public programs including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • APD • VR • DBS • SAMH • CSF • FDDC <p>RESPECT of Florida provides job opportunities for individuals who are blind or have other disabilities.</p>

FARF, RESPECT of Florida	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	1,173	1,201	1,246	1,198	1,181	972	1074	1164
# Employed in Subminimum Wage	250	257	225	212	112	112	54	30
Average Hourly Wage	\$9.25	\$9.39	\$9.49	\$9.83	\$10.43	\$10.79	\$11.92	\$12.76

Source: RESPECT Annual Recertification Data

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>CareerSource Florida (CSF)</p> <p>CareerSource Florida is the statewide workforce policy and investment board. Our partners include the Department of Commerce, 24 local workforce development boards and 100 career centers throughout Florida.</p> <p>CSF is governed by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) encompasses programs administered by CSF and the state Vocational Rehabilitation programs including Blind Services</p>	<p>CSF provides support to and oversight of the 24 local workforce development boards throughout the state and offers resources to assist individuals with job searches, career development and training.</p> <p>Services offered through the local CS offices include training, certifications, apprenticeships, and job search assistance.</p> <p>The primary programs/target audiences which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults • Youth • Dislocated Workers • Adult Education • Wagner Peyser <p>People with disabilities are represented in each of these programs/audiences.</p>	<p>CSF has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • Florida Required Partners under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) including FDOE/VR, FDOE/DBS, and Florida Dept. of Commerce, Unique Abilities Program • DCF/SAMH 	<p>Individuals are eligible who have been determined to have a barrier to employment which means 1 or more of the following populations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displaced homemakers • Low-income individuals Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians • Individuals with disabilities, including youth who are individuals with disabilities. • Older individuals. • Ex-offenders. • Homeless individuals or homeless children and youths • Youth who are in or have aged out of the foster care system. • Individuals who are English language learners, individuals who have low levels of literacy, and individuals facing substantial cultural barriers. • Migrant and seasonal farmworkers • Individuals within 2 years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under part A of title IV of the Social Security Act • Single parents (including single pregnant women). • Long-term unemployed individuals. • Such other groups as the Governor determines to have barriers to employment.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
Department of Commerce, Unique Abilities Partners Program	The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program recognizes businesses that employ individuals who have a disability as well as businesses that establish or contribute to organizations that support the independence of individuals who have a disability.	<p>The Unique Abilities Partners Program has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First • Florida Required Partners under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) including FDOE/VR, FDOE/DBS, and CareerSource FL • APD Transition Success Network (HB 1517) 	Businesses designated as a Unique Abilities Partner must demonstrate their support and commitment to the independence of Floridians with unique abilities.

Florida Commerce (Formerly DEO) and CSF	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
# of Customers w/ Disabilities Served	46,476	41,682	25,157	17,400	13,488	13,185
# Customers with Disabilities Competitively Employed	45,243	40,418	24,150	16,519	12,876	12,613

Source: The data was pulled from 4th quarter PIRL files for all participants who had a disability = 1; employment is defined as having employment (empqtr2 = 1) in second quarter after exit. NOTE: WP for PY2016 was recorded differently.

Agency & Operational Structure	Services	Coordination Activities	Eligibility Requirements
<p>The Arc of Florida, Inc.</p> <p>The Arc of Florida is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit trade association. It is governed by a board of directors made up of its member organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations - Finance 	The Arc of Florida is a membership association that works with local, state, and national partners to advocate for local chapters, public policies, and high quality supports for people with developmental and other disabilities to be fully included in all aspects of their community.	<p>The Arc has formal agreements with many entities which address employment and other related issues for people with disabilities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment First 	Member organizations of the Arc provide a wide variety of services to individuals with developmental disabilities and other life challenges.

PARTNER INFORMATION

Florida Vocational Rehabilitation	Helps people with disabilities find and maintain employment and enhance their independence. https://www.rehabworks.org/
Agency for Persons with Disabilities	Works with local organizations and private providers to support people who have developmental disabilities and their families in living, learning, and working in their communities. https://apd.myflorida.com/
The Family Café	Provides individuals with disabilities and their families with an opportunity for collaboration, advocacy, friendship and empowerment by serving as a facilitator of communication, a space for dialogue and a source of information. https://familycafe.net/
Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities / RESPECT of Florida	Promotes the interests of individuals with disabilities by acting as a public policy change agent, and to promote and serve the interests of community human service provider organizations. https://www.floridaarf.org/
Florida Disabled Outdoors Association	Enhances lives through accessible, inclusive recreation. https://www.fdoa.org/
The Florida Association of Centers for Independent Living	A statewide membership organization whose mission is to coordinate advocacy efforts that increase the capacity of Florida's network of Centers for Independent Living to support community living and independence for Floridians with disabilities. https://floridacils.org/
Florida Division of Blind Services	Helps blind and visually impaired Floridians achieve their goals and live productive and independent lives. https://dbs.fldoe.org/
Florida Alliance for Assistive Services & Technology (FAAST)	Provides a supportive partnership between Florida business and government to provide assistive technology products and services which will enable persons with disabilities to participate in independent living, education, work and recreation from birth to death. www.FAAST.org
NAMI Florida	To improve the quality of life of individuals and their families affected by mental illness through education, support and advocacy. https://namiflorida.org/
Disability Rights Florida	Disability Rights Florida was founded in 1977 as the statewide designated protection and advocacy system for individuals with disabilities in the State of Florida. Disability Rights Florida is a not-for-profit corporation that has authority and responsibility under nine federal grants. https://disabilityrightsflorida.org/

Florida Department of Health	<p>The spearhead for public health in Florida with statewide responsibilities; Florida's 67 county health departments; 8 Children's Medical Services area offices; 12 Medical Quality Assurance regional offices; 9 Disability Determinations regional offices; and 3 public health laboratories.</p> <p>https://www.floridahealth.gov/index.html</p>
Florida Commission for Transportation Disadvantaged	<p>Ensures the availability of efficient, cost-effective, and quality transportation services for transportation disadvantaged persons. The Transportation Disadvantaged Program is a coordinated state-wide effort which groups riders together for a shared ride service.</p> <p>https://ctd.fdot.gov/</p>
Family Network on Disabilities	<p>Florida's resource for helping families of children with disabilities.</p> <p>https://fndusa.org/</p>
Arc of Florida	<p>Advocates for local chapters, public policies, and high quality supports for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be fully included in all aspects of their community.</p> <p>https://www.arcflorida.org/</p>
The Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (FDOE/BEESS)	<p>Coordinates student services throughout the state and participates in multiple inter-agency efforts designed to strengthen the quality and variety of services available to eligible students with disabilities.</p> <p>https://www.fldoe.org/academics/exceptional-student-edu/</p>
Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)	<p>Provides individuals with Autism or related disabilities, their families, and professionals who work with them with free consultation, resources, and educational support to build knowledge, infrastructure, sustainability, and capacity within the community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Florida Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities • Florida Atlantic University www.autism.fau.edu • Florida State University fsucard.com • University of Central Florida www.ucf-card.org • University of Florida at Gainesville www.card.ufl.edu • University of Florida at Jacksonville www.hscj.ufl.edu/pediatrics/autism/ • University of Miami www.umcard.org • University of South Florida card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu <p>https://florida-card.org/map.htm</p>
Disability Policy Works	<p>Develops and applies innovative practices to make policy work for people with disabilities. They seek to foster a national dialog and build collaborative partnerships that maximize public, nonprofit and business sector resources.</p> <p>www.disabilitypolicyworks.org</p>
Florida Developmental Disabilities Council	<p>Affects policy and services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families and their supports through education, advocacy and partnerships.</p> <p>https://www.fddc.org/</p>

