

Myths & Realities

About Olmstead and Employment First

Employment opportunities for Minnesotans with disabilities are expanding through the Minnesota Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy. Many Minnesotans with disabilities “choose” unemployment and under-employment because they do not have access to the information and experiences they need to make an **informed** choice about employment in the regular workforce.

The employment goal for the Minnesota Olmstead Plan is: **People with disabilities will have choices for competitive, meaningful and sustained employment in the most integrated setting.** The Minnesota Employment First Policy is a step towards achieving that goal. It makes typical jobs in the community the first and preferred, but not the only, outcome. It provides a vision of Minnesotans with disabilities who have the services and supports tailored to meet their needs; a job that is a match for their strengths, interests and skills; and ongoing supports where needed for long-term retention. Minnesota is the 32nd state in the nation to adopt an Employment First Policy.

With these changes come questions about what the Olmstead Plan and the Employment First Policy really mean. You may have heard some of the following myths.

MYTH 1: The Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy are closing down my son or daughter’s day provider.

REALITY: Nowhere in the Olmstead Plan or Employment First Policy is there any language stating that day services will be closed. Both of these initiatives ensure all people with disabilities receiving public services that want to work in the regular workforce, with or without supports, have that opportunity.

MYTH 2: The Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy will require my son or daughter to work 30-40 hours per week, at prevailing wages with benefits.

REALITY: Neither the Olmstead Plan nor Employment First Policy specify the number of hours, wages, and benefits that people with disabilities are required to earn. In fact, there are no requirements on people with disabilities.

MYTH 3: The Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy force my son or daughter to work in the regular workforce, rather than providing a choice.

REALITY: Neither the Olmstead Plan nor the Employment First Policy require people with disabilities to work in the regular workforce. They require actions by state agencies to increase employment opportunities and to ensure processes are in place that help people with disabilities understand the benefits of employment in the regular workforce so they can make an **informed** choice about employment based on factual information and their personal experiences.

MYTH 4: The Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy are trying to force my son or daughter off the public benefits and supports (e.g., SSI, Social Security, Medicaid, etc.) they need.

REALITY: Neither the Olmstead Plan nor the Employment First Policy state that people with disabilities will be moved off public benefits or out of services. In fact, they ensure that people understand the financial and other benefits of working **and** the work incentives that **protect** public benefits so that people with disabilities can choose to work without losing the financial support and insurance they need.

MYTH 5: The Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy require my son or daughter to work in community settings where they may not be safe.

REALITY: Neither the Olmstead Plan nor the Employment First Policy require people with disabilities to work in settings that they do not choose. Finding the right job match and setting are essential to successful employment. Being safe is part of that match. For many people, individualized job supports are an important element to working safely in the community. Both the Olmstead Plan and the Employment First Policy recognize the importance of adequate support services to ensure people who want to work in the community can do so safely.

MYTH 6: The idea of “community-based services” is a trendy topic that the Olmstead Plan and Employment First Policy latched onto.

REALITY: The notion that people with disabilities can and should have the opportunity to live fully in their communities goes back decades. In the 1960’s, 70’s, and 80’s people with disabilities and their families fought for the right to live in the community and receive community-based services, rather than living in segregated settings. In 1983, Home and Community-Based Services came into existence to ensure those with the most significant disabilities could receive long-term support services. Community-based employment supports, also known as individual supported employment, also emerged during this time.

In the 1999 Supreme Court Olmstead decision, the right for people with disabilities, including those with the most significant barriers, to receive public services in the community was affirmed. Minnesota’s Olmstead Plan is aligned with that court decision.

MYTH 7: Most people with disabilities cannot work in the regular workforce.

REALITY: There is a pervasive belief that most citizens with disabilities cannot be successfully employed in the regular workforce. That belief can be a greater barrier to employment than the disabling condition and is reflected in an employment rate of 44% for Minnesotans with disabilities compared to 81% for other citizens. With supported employment, accommodations and other practices, typical jobs are an option for people once considered “unemployable. The Employment First Policy requires state agencies to assume the employability of people with disabilities and work toward providing the services and supports needed to Minnesotans choosing to work in the regular workforce. Having the right services and supports are key. Not everyone will be successful, but many more Minnesotans with disabilities will have their own job on the payroll of a typical community business in the mainstream of community living.

We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.