

## ODEP's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program

### Executive Summary

A critical priority for the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), is to invest in systems change efforts that result in increased community-based, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities. This priority reflects growing support for a national movement called *Employment First*, a framework for systems-change that is centered on the premise that all citizens, including those individuals with the most significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life. Under this approach, publicly-financed systems are urged to align policies, regulatory guidance, and reimbursement structures to commit to integrated employment as the priority option with respect to the use of publicly-financed day and employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities. Many states have formally committed to the *Employment First* framework through official executive proclamation or formal legislative action.

ODEP recognizes that many states desire to align their policy and funding in support of an *Employment First* approach but may not yet possess the knowledge, skills, abilities and/or resources necessary to lead and facilitate such change. To address this need, ODEP has initiated the Employment First State Leadership Mentor Program (EFSLMP), a cross-disability focused, cross-systems change initiative. EFSLMP is providing the impetus for selected states to pursue systems change to fully implement the *Employment First* approach as the primary service delivery system for people with the most significant disabilities.

### Objectives of the EFSLMP

The objectives of the EFSLMP are to:

- Provide mentoring, intensive technical assistance and training to three (3) states as they transform employment delivery system to an *Employment First* approach. These states, referred to as protégé states, receive peer-to-peer mentoring from government officials in Washington state, a state that is considered a preeminent leader in *Employment First* and has made substantial progress in implementing integrated employment as the primary service option for working age adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Sponsor a community of practice comprised of interested cross-systems state teams across the country in order to facilitate shared experiences and strategies related to effectuating *Employment First* policies and practice.
- Link participating states with current Federal initiatives that are focused on promoting state-level systems-change conducive to *Employment First* objectives.

## Intensive Technical Assistance to Protégé States

Three protégé states - Iowa, Oregon, and Tennessee - are receiving technical assistance in the areas of strategic planning, policy development, and capacity building from state government officials in Washington state, EFLSMP's mentoring state. In 2006, the state of Washington adopted its "Working Age Adult Policy", the first comprehensive *Employment First* policy in the country. The protégé states also receive technical assistance, strategic guidance, and training from a pool of national subject experts in the areas of: capacity building; provider transformation; rate restructuring and service/funding alignment; stakeholder engagement; transition; and policy development. In 2013, key state public officials from the protégé states will also participate in an intensive mini-workgroup across the three states focused on alignment of service definitions, policies, and funding to produce performance-based outcomes focused on integrated employment.

## EFLSMP Community of Practice

In addition to the intensive technical assistance and training being offered to the EFLSMP protégé states, ODEP has launched an Employment First Community of Practice, which is open to state Employment First teams. As of March 2013, thirty-two states are participating in the EFLSMP Community of Practice.

### *Benefits of the EFLSMP Community of Practice*

The EFLSMP Community of Practice provides a variety of services to support state Employment First teams, including:

- **Monthly Webinars:** ODEP hosts monthly educational presentations on a variety of E1st topics facilitated by national leaders in the field of systems reform.
- **Access to ePolicyWorks Virtual Workspace:** ODEP's ePolicyWorks provides a free virtual policy workspace for all EFLSMP CoP participating states, along with an array of resources and services to encourage virtual communications and policy work in a safe and user-friendly environment. Features include:
  - Access to numerous informational resources, technical assistance tools and policy templates.
  - Participation in an ongoing systems-change dialogue, seeking answers from national subject matter experts in tackling key challenges with implementing *Employment First* objectives, and also sharing experiences and best practices among state teams in a safe, private virtual environment. Activities include weekly blogs and topic-specific chats among peers from various state government agencies and EFLSMP's pool of national subject matter experts.
  - State-specific Policy Working Groups, thus allowing state Employment First teams to work privately across agencies within a state on collaborative *Employment First* policy activities.
- **Access to Technical Assistance Resources and Policy Tools Developed through ODEP's EFLSMP:** A variety of technical assistance resources and policy tools are available to provide additional support free of charge to participating CoP states.

## *Expectations of State Employment First Teams Participating in the EFLSMP Community of Practice*

**In exchange for participation in the EFLSMP Community of Practice, CoP states are asked to commit to the following –**

- A continuation of cross-agency work toward the establishment of an *Employment First* strategic policy framework, inclusive of CoP engagement by the following state state entities: education, I/DD adult services, Medicaid, mental health, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce investment.
- Frequent utilization of the virtual workspace provided through ePolicyWorks, and the sharing of any policy outputs that are produced on the state level to further *Employment First* efforts with ODEP and the EFLSMP Community of Practice.
- Regular cross-agency participation by the above-mentioned systems in monthly EFLSMP Community of Practice webinars as well as other CoP activities planned in 2013-2014.
- Full participation in all EFLSMP evaluation activities directed toward the CoP state participants thru June 2014 (including completion of online surveys, telephone interviews, and virtual focus groups).

## *Coming Soon – New Opportunities for State Employment First Teams Participating in the EFLSMP Community of Practice*

**In order to provide more in-depth technical assistance and policy consulting opportunities for Employment First state teams, ODEP will be offering**

In the fall of 2013, ODEP will be offering an additional set of mentoring, strategic consulting and professional development activities for state governments that are actively involved in the EFLSMP Community of Practice. Through a structured curriculum facilitated by EFLSMP subject matter experts, appointed representatives from participating state teams will have the opportunity to receive additional consulting expertise and technical assistance focused on helping participants advance their state's policy reform goals in a specific area. The core state teams will also have the opportunity to spend time together as a small cohort of states (3-4 per working group) to further inform a collective vision of *Employment First* and build lasting networking relationships with peers from other states that are tackling similar challenges.

To participate, ODEP will work with each selected state to identify 2-4 representatives of the state's *Employment First* team who are the most appropriate to participate based upon their professional responsibilities. ODEP is looking for a mix of political leadership (who will only be engaged in 1-2 calls throughout the entire program) and senior management tasked with operationalizing the facets of a state *Employment First* strategy related to policy development, service delivery reform, funding/ reimbursement realignment, and outcomes measurement. Each selected state team will get the opportunity to participate in one working group, and as many as 8 working groups will be formed on a variety of topics, including but not limited to:

- Medicaid Waiver Reforms
- Transition Strategies
- Provider/Agency Transformation
- Building an Effective Workforce of Disability Service Professionals – Creating the Right Certification & Professional Development Requirements
- Reimbursement/Rate Restructuring related to Day, Employment, and Training Services
- Coordinating & Leveraging Resources across Systems

Participating states will receive comprehensive policy analysis and specific policy recommendations based upon their individual state's unique political and environmental dynamics. Through regularly scheduled teleconferences, participants will engage in interactive consulting based upon the challenges identified by each participating state. In between calls, participating states will have individual assignments to ensure continued progress during the program.

ODEP would like to accelerate and enhance policy and systems transformation efforts by providing a more interactive, intensive mentoring opportunity that allows the states to come together in smaller groups and work in a real-time fashion on key issues they are dealing with on the state level related to the operationalizing of their *Employment First* efforts. The idea is that these working groups will leverage the general training/TA that is being received in the larger Community of Practice by facilitating more focused work on specific topics in order to help states complete concrete policy outcomes.

Eligibility will be contingent upon a demonstrated record of active participation in the EFSLMP Community of Practice across various state systems, as well as a cross-disability focus in state Employment First activities.

*For more Information or to Participate in ODEP's EFSLMP Community of Practice*

**For more information or to participate in ODEP's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program, please contact Serena Lowe (Senior Policy Advisor, ODEP) at [Lowe.Serena.D@dol.gov](mailto:Lowe.Serena.D@dol.gov).**

## **ODEP's Ongoing Commitment to Integrated Employment**

Integrated employment refers to jobs held by people with disabilities in typical workplace settings where the majority of persons employed are not persons with disabilities, where individuals earn the greater of prevailing or minimum wages with related employment and health benefits, are paid directly by the employer, are preferably engaged full-time, and have the opportunity for professional and career advancement. ODEP offers a dedicated website containing comprehensive information on integrated employment for a variety of audiences: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/ietoolkit/>.