

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Employment First: Commonly Asked Questions From Individuals and Families

11/19/14

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QUESTION #1: Is the state closing sheltered workshops?

Answer: The Executive Order directs DHS to prohibit new referrals to sheltered workshops after July 1, 2015. Sheltered workshops may continue to exist after July 2015, but DHS expects these providers will ramp down support for sheltered work over time and increase integrated and community-based services. For this reason, it is important to focus on other employment services and supports that are integrated and community-based.

The state of Oregon is providing increased funding and support for providers who want to learn how to support integrated employment or enhance their current integrated employment services.

QUESTION #2: If I leave the sheltered workshop for community employment, but it doesn't work out, can I go back to the sheltered workshop?

Answer: Until July 1, 2015, you can go back to a workshop. The state's goal is to promote individual, integrated employment. Your Personal Agent (PA) or Service Coordinator (SC) will help you seek other community-based employment services to help reach your employment goal, such as job development, employment path community, and day services.

The ultimate goal will continue to be individual integrated employment.

QUESTION #3: What if I don't want an integrated job? What about choice?

Answer: Oregon is an Employment First state. Employment First is based on the presumption that everyone who wants to work can do so, and that integrated work is the first priority. Informed choice helps people make the best decision for their lives. It helps them to look at the benefits of working, and what kind of job fits their lives.

Those who do not choose integrated, community jobs may look at other community-based services such as day support services.

QUESTION #4: What about the strain put on families when an individual doesn't have a job yet and is waiting at home until they hear from VR?

Answer: We understand that while working with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), finding a job can take time. In the meantime, there are community-based services an individual may access through the Office of Developmental Disability Services (ODDS). For example, ODDS services such as Day Support activities, Employment Path, or Small Group Supported Employment are available. You may be eligible for up to 25 hours per week or 108.3 hours per month, divided whatever way you like, to access services.

QUESTION #5: I feel that I am safe at my sheltered workshop and my friends are there. Will I be less safe and will I still have friends if I work in the community?

Answer: Leaving a place where you have been for a long time can be scary, but it also brings new opportunities for others to come into your life. It does not mean you have to give up those friendships; you can make new ones to add to your life. If those relationships are important to you, make an effort to stay connected to your friends. Discuss with your Personal Agent or Service Coordinator options for spending time with friends outside of work.

Finding a work place that is safe is important to everyone. Putting safeguards in place when looking or setting up the job should always be a primary consideration. Good co-workers can be a great support system as well. Building a circle of support is important to all of us with or without disabilities.

We are not aware of any studies that show that community jobs pose more risk to individuals for abuse, neglect, or exploitation. However, if you or your family member is concerned about safety, this should be discussed during planning and deciding on the nature and type of community job. A job coach or case manager can also help address any concerns about on-the-job risks.

QUESTION #6: How long might I expect to work with VR to find a job?

Answer: The time can vary, depending on many factors. The current average from applying for VR services to finding a job is 295 days (approx. 10 months) for people with I/DD receiving ODDS services. In some cases it can take less time and in some it can take longer. Coming to meetings prepared is very important and can help speed up the process. Additionally, the time required for the VR counselor and the participant to develop an employment plan from being found eligible for services is being shortened from 180 days to 90 days (approx. 3 months) as of January 1, 2015. This should result in people moving through the system quicker. From the initial meeting at VR, the person should be actively involved with the VR counselor and other team members to identify a vocational goal based on his or her interests and abilities and determine the steps needed to reach that goal. Other services and providers may be identified to add to the plan.

QUESTION #7: What can I do to help shorten the time it takes to get a job?

Answer: A VR counselor may provide a list of documents ahead of time – come to your meeting with those documents. Show up for scheduled appointments and invite your team so they can help inform this process. If you have a legal guardian, make sure that person attends the initial VR meeting. In addition, we suggest that people come prepared with their ideas on employment: What are you interested in doing for work? What options and possibilities have you considered? What has worked for you in the past, and what have been the challenges? Come prepared with ideas and actively engage in the process. Additionally, if you are participating in Discovery with ODDS, you can request a referral at the same time to VR to minimize any delay between Discovery completion and the start of VR services.

QUESTION #8: In the past, I (or my child) was told I was “too disabled” to work by VR. Why should I try again?

Answer: Counselors can make mistakes, but the field of rehabilitation is ever changing and counselors learn new skills and strategies to assist individuals in securing work. The regulations that govern VR also change. VR now presumes that individuals, regardless of the severity of their disability, can benefit from VR services in terms of an employment outcome.

However, if anyone believes their file is being closed for the wrong reasons, they have the right to talk to the manager, speak with the Client Assistance Program, or file a request for a fair hearing.

QUESTION #9: In the past I went to VR, and I didn’t get a job, why should I go back?

Answer: VR has recently increased staffing in addition to increasing focused training on clients with I/DD. VR hired eight new counselors who specialize in working with people with I/DD. These new techniques, resources and strategies, along with an increased focus on the accountability of job developers, will hopefully mean greater success. In addition, VR has a greater collaboration and relationships with partners at ODDS and the Oregon Department of Education (ODE).

VR also needs the individuals to help by coming prepared to their meetings, involving members of their team, and engaging in the job-seeking process.

QUESTION #10: What does integrated employment mean?

Answer: Oregon’s Executive Order 13-04 defines integrated employment as an employment setting that allows an individual to interact with non-disabled people in a typical community work environment, including self-employment or small business models.

In Oregon, an integrated employment setting may include a group, enclave or a mobile crew as long as the individual has opportunities to interact with non-disabled people in the employment setting.

Integrated employment does not mean facility-based work in a sheltered workshop or non-work activities.

QUESTION #11: Can I still work in my enclave/group work?

Answer: Yes, if your choice is to work in an enclave, you can continue to work in that job. However, you will have a chance every year to discuss options for individual integrated employment and job advancement.

QUESTION #12: How do I (or my child) compete for jobs against people without disabilities?

Answer: Savvy employers are realizing the positive impact employing people with disabilities has on their bottom line. Employing a person with a disability brings in new perspectives, new and different talents, and also a new customer base.

For the individual, competing for an open job is just one strategy. Job carving and customized employment are creative ways to serve both the employer's needs and match the individual's skills, interests and strengths.

Self-employment is another option to consider in addition to job carving and customized employment.

DHS is increasing capacity to support these other employment strategies.

QUESTION #13: Is sub-minimum wage considered integrated employment? Shouldn't I make the same as my non-disabled peers?

Answer: Integrated employment at a competitive wage (one equal to what is paid to individuals without disabilities performing similar work) is the desired goal. Currently state and federal law does allow for sub-minimum wage in jobs defined as integrated in certain circumstances.

An individual who is working in an individual integrated job that pays below minimum wage may want to talk to their Service Coordinator or Personal Agent. They could complete the Career Development Plan, which helps a person set goals and plan for a job that pays more. They may also want to use VR Job Development services in order to find a job that is a better match and makes use of all the skills the individual has to offer and pays minimum wage or better.

QUESTION #14: What are schools doing to help my child prepare for the workforce?

Answer: Education is committed to raising expectations by working to create a culture where integrated employment is an expectation. As a part of a student's transition plan, schools are working to provide support for work experiences, job shadowing, and other opportunities.

Expectations around work and skill-building should start to be addressed as early as possible with parents and students.

Schools are working closer with adult agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Developmental Disabilities (DD) to encourage attendance at Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. IEPs include age-appropriate transition assessments which identify the student's preferences, interests, needs, and strengths to support postsecondary goals for education, training, employment, and independent living as necessary. As the IEP team designs the transition plan, they will take into account any needed specially-designed instruction and related services.

QUESTION #14: Can I get transportation support if I get a job?

Answer: It's important to think about transportation at the beginning of the job exploration process and make sure to include this in the planning. Don't let transportation be a barrier to work though: think creatively about options. Consider natural supports and other options in the community.

An individual has some responsibility in development of resources and their services whenever possible. Everyone has challenges when it comes to transportation. The individual and their team can and should be involved in trying to plan for transportation early on.

Transportation needs, including natural supports, should be identified in a person's Individual Support Plan (ISP). Support is also available through the ODDS Community First Choice K plan for accessing or arranging transportation to and from work if an individual has an assessed need to get to a job, or a need for support at the work location. Community transportation must be provided in the most cost-effective way available.

QUESTION #16: What do I do if I am offered a job I do not want to do?

Answer: You should never be “placed” in a job. You are in the driver’s seat.

You, along with your team, should identify your job goals at the beginning of the process. Your ISP team, including the VR counselor and personal agent or service coordinator, should be fully informed of the types of jobs you are interested in, as well as what you disliked about previous jobs. A process like Discovery might help you to find out more about your strengths, passions and interests.

If you have concerns with a job offer, please discuss those concerns with your job developer or VR counselor. If you are in a job you don’t like, you can and should explore other options.

QUESTION #17: What if I’m not ready to work?

Answer: Going to work is exciting but it can be scary regardless of whether or not you have a disability.

It would be helpful to know what needs to change for you to be ready to work. Why do you feel you aren’t ready to work? What are your specific concerns? What would need to change in order for you to be comfortable and confident about starting work?

There are activities and services available to help you understand your interests and preferences. If you think you want to work but may not be ready, you should talk to your Personal Agent or Service Coordinator about your employment goals and concerns. There are services that are available through the developmental disability program to help you move forward in exploring employment. Your Personal Agent or Service Coordinator can complete a Career Development Plan (CDP) and Individual Service Plan (ISP) with you. The Career Development Plan can help you identify why you feel you aren’t ready to work and possible solutions. For instance: Are you afraid of the impact of work on your benefits? Are you uncomfortable being out in the community on your own?

QUESTION #18: What support is there for rural areas? Will there be enough job developers, services and jobs in rural areas?

Answer: Historically, there have been challenges with issues like capacity and transportation in rural areas. DHS is developing a plan to build capacity in rural areas, taking into consideration the unique challenges of these areas.

Employment First will increase provider capacity in a number of ways:

- Creative training options (webinars, training grants, etc...);
- Additional staff in VR/ODE focused on I/DD population around the state;
- New rates focused on services such as Discovery and Integrated Employment can help incentivize capacity in rural areas;
- Local county developmental disability offices working more collaboratively with VR to develop resources in rural areas;
- Targeted efforts to ensure providers are credentialed by both ODDS and VR to provide job services in all rural areas;
- Customized employment is an option to help people get jobs rather than open competitive employment;
- Adopt best practices from organizations such as the Institute on Rural Studies in Montana to help inform and meet employment goals in small and rural areas;
- Recognize that given challenges in rural areas, there may need to be flexible and creative options to make sure needs are met.

QUESTION #19: What is the safety net if someone doesn't get a job, or is laid off, or has their hours reduced?

Answer: Any employee, whether or not disabled, can face the possibility of being laid off or a reduction in hours. If someone loses their job or has reduced hours, they won't be sitting at home necessarily. People should still have access to other services, working toward a job or day services.

Unemployment insurance is available to anyone who is laid off if they worked in a community job.

If the issue is that your hours have been reduced, talk to your Service Coordinator or Personal Agent: if you currently work 10 hours, perhaps you can get another job somewhere else for another 10 hours. Be sure to let them know you want more hours.

If someone is concerned about losing benefits, Ticket to Work/SSI may be able to address this. Information is at: www.ssa.gov/work/overview.html.

This is also an area to discuss with your benefits counselor early in the process of seeking employment.

QUESTION #20: Do you think someone who has severe disabilities, both cognitive and physical, can work?

Answer: Yes. In fact much of the Employment First efforts are intended to help people with significant disabilities achieve integrated employment. In Oregon and across the country there are increasing stories of people with significant disabilities achieving their employment goals.

One key to achieving community employment for individuals with significant disabilities is to find out that person's unique strengths, interests, and abilities.

This information can be used to find potential employers who have a need for those skills. This process is often referred to as "job carving" or customized job development. Self-employment can also be effective in meeting the employment goals of people with significant disabilities.

Once someone does find a job, there are ongoing supports such as job coaching that are available to help someone keep their job and advance in their employment goals.

QUESTION #21: Will I lose my benefits if I work?

Answer: While many have concerns about losing benefits while working, there are initial safeguards to protect benefits during the beginning phases of employment. Almost always, working will provide a person with more income than they would receive through benefits/services such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), SNAP (food stamps) and health benefits. You can earn a significant annual income and still maintain Medicaid benefits. Some people choose to work part-time and retain benefits.

Benefits counseling services are available through:

- 1. Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) – Plan for Work project**
(800) 452-1694; www.droregon.org/need-help/plan-for-work
- 2. Work Incentives Network (WIN)**
Local contact information available at:
www.oregon.gov/dhs/vr/win/Pages/Win.aspx
- 3. Independent Living Resources:**
www.ilr.org/

QUESTION #22: What steps is Oregon taking to improve job opportunities for people with I/DD? Are people getting jobs?

Answer: The numbers show that more people are getting jobs. The data shows that from March 2013 to March 2014 there was an increase of more than 130 people (or 10 percent increase) with individual, integrated jobs.

A number of major policy changes and structures are now in place, so we expect the number of people working to increase going forward. There was a 29 percent increase in applicants who are ODDS service recipients to VR in the last fiscal year. This shows there has been a definitive increase in people interested in integrated employment.



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