

A man in a bright yellow hoodie and a woman are looking at a laptop screen in an office setting. The man is pointing at the screen with his right hand. The background is slightly blurred, showing office shelves and windows.

Employment First “103”: Supported Employment SUCCESS Stories

**Aging & Disability Services
January 21, 2026**

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Health and
Human Services

Overview



Iowa's Employment Vision

“Employment in the general workforce is the first priority and the expected and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age Iowans with disabilities.”

What is “Community Employment?”

We believe that everyone, even people with significant disabilities, can and should have the opportunity to be fully employed in their community and take part in community life.

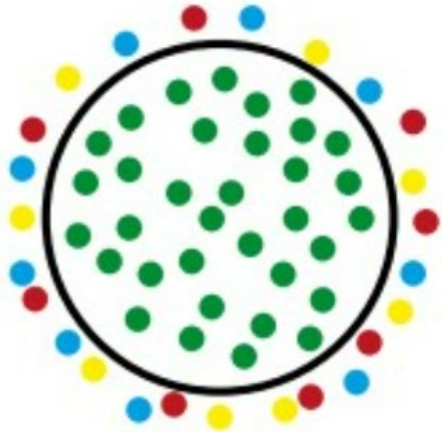
Individual job

Paid by employer

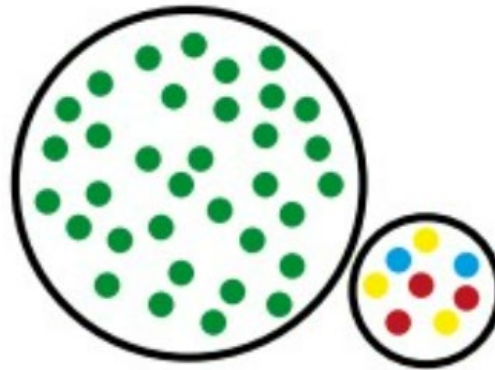
Normal job
setting

Integrated with
regular workforce

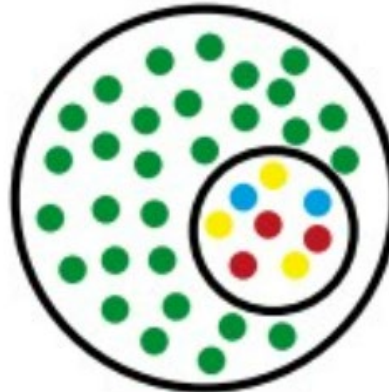
Natural supports
(+ provider if
needed)



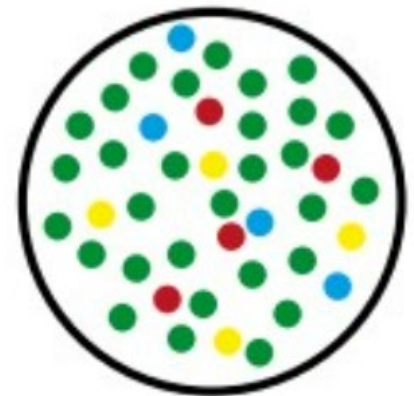
Exclusion



Segregation



Integration



Inclusion

Customized Employment/Customized Discovery

► Discovery

- 24–60 hours over 5–9 weeks; reveals vocational themes
- Assumes employability with the right job match & supports

► Job search planning (Visual Resume)

► Job development & negotiation

- “Job carving” and/or “Job analysis”

► Post-employment support

CE Success Video

“Owner Revolution”

CASS, Incorporated

Individual Placement and Support (IPS Model)

- ▶ IPS is an evidence-based practice for people with serious behavioral health disabilities.
- ▶ IPS is very successful at helping people get jobs of their choice.
- ▶ IPS is based on 8 practice principles,
- ▶ IPS programs are evaluated yearly by a Fidelity Review which measures how closely they follow the evidence-based practice model.
- ▶ Iowa's IPS State Trainers and Fidelity Reviewers work from the University of Iowa's Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health (CEBH)

What is IPS?

“IPS is a highly successful, evidenced-based model of supported employment that promotes a ‘recovery through work’ philosophy whereby individuals ... achieve competitive, integrated employment when assisted with ongoing support services.”

IPS Early Success!



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- A young woman 19 yrs. old @ enrollment
- Had **30+ hospitalizations** d/t serious mental illness **ages 17-19**
- Became employed through IPS, no more hospitalizations!
- Lost her job d/t COVID19, unemployed Mar-Apr-May 2020 and re-hospitalized 3x
- IPS Team helped her get another job May 2020, and she's remained stable in her mental health *and* her job ever since
- Using a PASS Plan she bought a car, moved to her own apartment, and has improved family & friend relationships
- *This* is the kind of success possible with IPS for Iowans with SMI who want to work



Work as Recovery – A Firsthand Account

[“Brian’s Story,” Hope Haven, Inc., LeMars, IA](#)

From a mental health practitioner :

“I had someone crying in my office that I didn’t feel I could help, I thought she needed a higher level of care. She loved animals. [IPS Specialist] started working with her and found her a job at a kennel and she is a different person today and getting better and better. I saw all these boxes she needed to check first before considering work, but now all of those boxes are easier to check *because of work*. [IPS Specialist] is so caring and compassionate about what she does and goes above and beyond for everyone she works with.”

Self-Employment

- ▶ Medicaid provides supported employment for self-employment similarly to what it does for CIE
- ▶ Voc Rehab has the Iowa Self-Employment Program (ISE)
- ▶ <https://workforce.iowa.gov/vr/career-planning-other-services/self-employment>
- ▶ ISE is for VR or IDB customers who choose self-employment

Thinking Outside the Employment Box

Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Share Their Self-Employment Success Stories



Marissa
in her
new
green-
house

**Beautiful
blooms from
Straw Hat Farms**



Nic at work in his lens-cutting lab.



Jake Spece tending calves
at Johnston Creek Farms

Jake used his expertise in Dairy Science and a PASS (Plan to Achieve Self-Support) to create a strategically targeted business that provides customized feeding and tending of baby calves for farmers and agribusinesses.

A Sampling of Success Stories

Booklet of 18 people who used HCBS & VR services to start and run their own successful businesses,

https://cdd.center.uiowa.edu/sites/cdd.center.uiowa.edu/files/2025-12/thinking_outside_employment_box.pdf

Iowa Job Honor Awards

<https://www.jobhonor.org/media-iowa>

My favorite is 2016 “Owner Revolution”

Iowa Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG)
video: Wage Earners, “Marianne”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_94Ulnr5XU&feature=youtu.be

(scroll to 2.52)

E1st for Iowans with Disabilities

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Benefits Planning for People with Disabilities

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Individual Placement and Support

University of Iowa Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health,
www.iowacebh.org

Customized Employment aka Customized Discovery

Ashlea Lantz Alantz@griffinhammis.com

IVRS Website on Customized Discovery,

<https://workforce.iowa.gov/vr/partners/community-rehabilitation-programs/menu-services>

Griffin-Hammis Associates,

<https://www.griffinhammis.com/what-we-do/customized-employment/>

The IPS Employment Center, Lebanon NH,

www.ipsworks.org

ODEP's Employment 1st initiatives,

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/EmploymentFirst.htm>

Iowa APSE on Employment 1st,

<https://iowaapse.org/about-us/what-is-employment-first/>

Includes a nice timeline graphic of events leading up to Employment First

JAN, The Job Accommodation Network,

<https://askjan.org/index.html>

Local Assistive Technology Act Program,

<https://iowaat.org>

Contact Info

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Thank You!