



Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

Reporting Period: July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025

Prepared by: Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities

In alignment with ISA Agreement No. DS21-003118

Annual Summary

FY2025 served as a foundational year for Arizona's Employment First initiative across outreach, training, evaluation, and workforce development efforts. During this period, work has been centered on intentional messaging, stakeholder engagement, and capacity building as the foundation to re-invigorate the Employment First movement in Arizona.

Throughout the year, the Sonoran Center and its partners maintained steady progress: launching a new monthly learning series, finalizing plain language Guiding Principles, completing the statewide DESP Survey in collaboration with ADDPC and Arizona APSE, and continuing outreach across employers, schools, and communities. The Employment First website was successfully migrated to the Sonoran Center to strengthen hosting systems, enhance cybersecurity, and create a centralized resource hub for Arizona stakeholders.

While much of this year's work was behind the scenes including realigning priorities, clarifying messaging, and gathering feedback, momentum is clearly building. Arizona's Employment First efforts are now grounded in establishing systems, aligning messaging, and community engagement and implementation heading into FY2026.

Summary narrative FY 2025:

In April of 2025, the Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities welcomed two new team members to the Arizona Employment First Initiative: [Jessica Winchester](#), Employment First Program Manager, and [Gina Griffiths](#), Employment First Coordinator. This marked a significant milestone: the first time that Arizona has had a dedicated team in place to guide and grow Employment First efforts statewide. With experienced leadership in place, they are building on a strong foundation and increasing efforts to transform disability employment services, so all people can succeed in competitive integrated employment.

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Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

Earlier in FY 2025, the [Employment First website](#) was migrated to be housed within the Sonoran Center, in September of 2024, to improve cybersecurity, accessibility, and long-term sustainability. A full content audit was conducted to determine what information should be updated, removed or added. Community input has been, and continues to be, sought to influence the content of the website. The team has begun drafting an information architecture plan to guide a future in-depth website redesign. Notably, for FY 2025, the Employment First website had over 3700 active users with an average 30 minutes of engagement time.

Throughout the year, the Employment First Team has formally and informally championed the Employment First vision in multiple settings, from Arizona all the way to Washington, DC. The team engaged in committees, cabinets and workgroups; staffed vendor tables at conferences and events; and presented at the annual [Association of People Supporting Employment First Conference](#) in June of 2025. They are sharing the Employment First message by educating others on resources, gaps and opportunities and influencing systems of change from the inside.

The [Employment First Advisory Workgroup](#) has 36 members representing self-advocates, state agencies, advocacy organizations, health plans, providers, and University Centers for Excellence in Disabilities, with roughly 20 people participating in each meeting. Through critical planning and analysis, the subcommittees within the Advisory Workgroup were integrated into the full group to accomplish the workgroup's goals. Key outputs included rewriting the [EF Guiding Principles](#) in plain language, development of a universal Employment First Training Module, and a resource on the impacts of work income on benefits has been developed. This group continues to drive the work of the Employment First Initiative.

The Sonoran Center has continued to offer a monthly professional learning series to promote both general awareness and implementation of evidence-based strategies as a resource for all stakeholders to advance Employment First in Arizona. In December of 2024, the series transitioned from Monday Mindset to [Employment First: Topics & Tactics](#) in order to add more structured presentations to meet identified community needs. Satisfaction survey responses indicate that 89% of attendees are satisfied or extremely satisfied with these sessions. An average of 50 people attend these sessions each month.

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Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

A major achievement in the Employment First Initiative was the development, implementation, evaluation and analysis of the Arizona Direct Employment Services Professional (DESP) Survey. This effort, conducted in partnership with the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC), the Arizona Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) and the Colorado Office of Employment First (COEF), resulted in the *Shaping the Future of Employment Services in Arizona* [report](#) and [infographic](#) offering critical insight into the workforce supporting competitive integrated employment in Arizona. The findings and recommendations are already being used to inform future training priorities, technical assistance strategies, and statewide planning to support the Employment First Initiative and elevate the level of disability employment professionals in Arizona.

Finally, an integral component of the Employment First Initiative is employer engagement. In September of 2024, Governor Hobbs signed [Executive Order 2024-04](#) Creating the *Governor's Talent Ready AZ Workforce Cabinet*. Within this Cabinet, the *Arizonans Living with Disabilities Working Group* was established. The Employment First Team at the Sonoran Center is represented on this Working Group. The work is centered on employer engagement and building opportunities for Arizonans with disabilities in employment. While this work is early, it is an essential activity to achieving our goals.

Summaries of activities for Q1 through Q3 of FY 2025 can be found here: [EF Impact Report](#) (Q1 & Q2) and [CY 1Q2025 EF](#) Report. Detailed reporting for Q4 is available in Appendix A.

Reporting update:

In FY 2025 multiple amendments to the Service Agreement occurred and reporting efforts were streamlined in collaboration with the funder. An annual report of activities is being submitted due to these updates. Moving forward, reports will be submitted on a quarterly basis, with invoices aligned to that same schedule.

Looking forward to FY 2026 and beyond:

With the infusion of new staff, new ideas and new energy, the Employment First Initiative in Arizona has been afforded a critical opportunity to build momentum, grow

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Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

capacity, and effect meaningful change in the disability employment landscape in Arizona. The team is amid developing a strategic plan to guide the work moving forward.

The foundation of this developing plan is to continue to receive feedback from the community. The July session of *Employment First: Topics & Tactics* will serve as a general community focus group to identify the successes, challenges and idealized outcomes of Arizona Employment First. The Advisory Workgroup is creating a messaging campaign to ensure that all champions of Employment First are using consistent and accurate language. All of this feedback will be compiled into a marketing and outreach campaign with resources that stakeholders will access through the Employment First website. The campaign will include videos with an introduction to Employment First and vignettes of success stories being the first priority.

In addition to the marketing and outreach campaigns, the website will house a centralized resource hub providing job seekers, their families, employers, providers, state agency staff, advocates and all community members access to high quality information to support all Competitive Integrated Employment efforts. Employment First is a community-driven initiative, and it is imperative that the community has access to the tools and resources necessary to implement it with fidelity.

The Employment First team plans to launch a quarterly newsletter in FY 2026 with content driven by community feedback. Additionally, Employment First office hours will be launched in collaboration with Arizona APSE to ensure access to subject matter experts on an ongoing basis for people working to problem solve, increase knowledge, build capacity and more.

Trainings and outreach will continue with a targeted focus on employers and professionals. The Employment First Training Module will be publicly available to all on a user-friendly platform, and it will be promoted widely. Recommendations from the DESP survey will be implemented in partnership with the original collaborators to “close the loop” on the survey activities. The team is committed to honoring the feedback shared by the community by enacting any activities, strategies or outcomes that are feasible and possible.

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Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

Moving beyond the next fiscal year, the team has a vision of a future with an **Arizona Office of Employment First**. The work of the Employment First movement will be data driven and transparent, with a real-time data dashboard demonstrating outcomes. Resources will be readily available to all through a centralized, comprehensive website. This is a future with the elimination of subminimum wage certificates in Arizona. This is a big vision, and with strategic planning and community collaboration, it will be the future in Arizona.

*Respectfully submitted by the Sonoran Center Employment First Team:
Jessica Winchester, Employment First Program Manager;
Lorie Sandaine, Systems Change Liaison; and
Gina Griffiths, Employment First coordinator.
University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities.*

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Appendix A

Highlights & Key Activities in Q4		
Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.9 Informational Events	<p>Internal Sonoran Center educational events to onboard Summer Work Program staff and share Welcome to Employment First presentation</p> <p>Presenters: Gina Griffiths & Jessica Winchester</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May 28th – met with 11 staff for Sonoran Center summer work program to share Employment First principles May 30th – met with 17 staff for Sonoran Center summer work program to share Employment First principles
5.1.5 EF Events & Trainings	Employment First Topics & Tactics	<p>April 14th – Understanding Work Incentives: How SSI Supports Employment and Independence</p> <p>May 12th – Shaping the Future of Disability Employment Service in Arizona</p> <p>June 9th – Exploring APSE's Role in Advancing Employment First Principles in Arizona</p>
	Coordinator: Gina Griffiths	
	<p>Presentation at IHD Evidence for Success Disability Conference</p> <p>Presenter: Loretta Alvarez</p>	Building Bridges: Strengthening School Partnerships for Effective Pre-ETS and Work-Based Learning
	<p>Training for AdvoCats on Summer Work Program</p> <p>Presenter: Loretta Alvarez</p>	AdvoCats Training Session 2 shared foundational principles of EF for Sonoran Center Trainees who are working in the Summer Work Program – May 2, 2025

Highlights & Key Activities		
Deliverable	Activity	Impact

Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

5.1.1 Collaboration	Employment First Team members collaborate on various local, state and national entities to increase knowledge, network with thought leaders, identify resources and advance Employment First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AZ Governor's Workforce Cabinet Subgroup – Arizonans Living with Disabilities – Gina Griffiths • Arizona APSE – Gina Griffiths, My Le Sandaine • AZ Community of Practice on Transition – Gina Griffiths • APSE State Policy Coffee Talk – Gina Griffiths • APSE Public Policy Committee – Gina Griffiths • APSE Pre-ETS Community of Practice – Loretta Alvarez
5.1.2 Outreach	Developed basic informational flyer, zoom backgrounds, and zoom badges for team and community use	Shared Employment First zoom backgrounds and badges with Advisory Workgroup
	Outreach at vendor fair Vendor Rep: Makenna Thuringer	Vendor table sharing Employment First messaging at the Institute for Human Development 2025 Evidence for Success Disability Conference , June 23-24, 2025
	Outreach at conference Presenter: Jessica Winchester	Presented Using Data to Advance Employment First at the APSE 2025 National Conference in Washington DC
5.1.3 Employer Engagement	The Employment First Initiative is represented by Gina Griffiths on the Governor's Workforce Cabinet focused on Arizonan's Living with Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participated in bi-monthly meetings • Introduced State As a Model Employer concept, which is being explored by the Governor's office

Employment First FY 2025 Annual Report

5.1.12 Advisory Workgroup	Advisory Workgroup	The Advisory Workgroup met on May 15 Advisor and prepared to develop Employment First messaging.
	Actionable workgroup tasks	The workgroup offered feedback on a Did You Know SSI informational document for community use. This document will be publicly available in July.

Highlights & Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.15 Contract Deliverables	Arizona Employment First Webpage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated resources through Employment First: Topics & Tactics as they were developed Updated contact information to mailto:employmentfirst@arizona.edu
	Develop new resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did You Know SSI informational document Employment First zoom backgrounds and badges