



Employment First FY 2026 Quarter 1 Report

Reporting Period: July 1, 2025 – September 30, 2025
Prepared by: Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities
In alignment with ISA Agreement No. DS21-003118

FY 2026 Q1 Narrative Summary

With the infusion of new staff, new ideas and new energy in the previous year, the Employment First Initiative in Arizona continues to solidify the foundation of the movement, build sustainable collaborations in the community, and identify the needs of local areas to successfully implement policies and practices that align with the Employment First philosophy.

In the first quarter of 2026, the team continued to work across all areas of Employment First, including outreach to new partners, reinforcing relationships with existing partners, soliciting feedback from the community, cultivating messaging for the community, developing training and resource materials, training and presenting to various stakeholders, contributing to partner initiatives and advancing a long-term strategy to ensure job seekers in Arizona are supported in achieving competitive integrated employment outcomes.

The Employment First Team continues to champion the Employment First (EF) vision in multiple settings, throughout Arizona.

Q1 Activities Summary

The [Employment First Advisory Workgroup](#) meets bi-monthly to collaborate and provide guidance on the work of the AZ Employment First Initiative. The Advisory Workgroup met on [July 17th](#) and [September 18th](#) in this quarter. The July meeting focused on soliciting feedback to develop consistent EF messaging for Arizona. The Workgroup made the decision to update the AZ Employment First logo for the first time since its creation. Feedback also revealed a strong desire for clearer, more unified EF language across agencies, providers and other stakeholders, which will guide statewide training and communication messaging in FY 26. The August meeting focused on sharing draft talking points developed from the feedback received and sharing draft logos for feedback and finalization. Finalization of talking points, messaging and a logo are imminent and will contribute meaningfully to the efforts of

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all disability employment champions. These resources will be deployed in October for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).

Arizona Employment First offers 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. [Employment First: Topics & Tactics](#) had an average attendance of 50 people this quarter, with the highest attendance, 67 people, achieved in September. Satisfaction survey responses indicate that 81% of attendees are satisfied or extremely satisfied with these sessions. Topics are developed in response to identified community needs. As appropriate, recordings of the sessions and relevant resources are posted on the Employment First website.

While Topics & Tactics is intended to educate the community, the EF team utilized the [July session](#) to introduce the new EF team and solicit feedback to help guide the strategic direction of this work. The identified overarching themes indicated the need for increased EF awareness, improved system alignment and coordination, policy and structural change in disability employment services, earlier transition planning, a focus on the expectation of employment for all, seamless supports for families, and a focus on employer engagement.

AZ Employment First continues to be engaged with the [Governor's Talent Ready AZ Workforce Cabinet](#) through the *Arizonans Living with Disabilities Working Group*. Through recommendations offered by the Working Group, Governor Hobbs is planning to sign an Executive Order in October of 2025 to declare Arizona as A Model Employer (AAME). A website with resources for both job seekers and employers is being developed and will also launch in October, as a celebration of NDEAM. The Working Group is finalizing a marketing and communications plan to promote these successes. The Working Group is also diligently focused to ensure that AAME is implemented with fidelity and that data is collected to track outcomes. Gina Griffiths is supporting these efforts by reviewing the identified resources for the resource hub, reviewing marketing and website language for community inclusion alignment, and collaborating on the AAME project.

Arizona Employment First has been meeting with local and national EF stakeholders and experts to share information, build partnerships, create opportunities, and build

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the EF community. A small sampling of meaningful engagement is represented here. Jessica Winchester and Gina Griffiths met with [Sydney Pearson](#), Legislative Aide to Senator Mark Kelly, to discuss the [Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act](#) (TCIEA) and opportunities to advance CIE outcomes. This conversation helped strengthen relationships with federal partners and provided insight into upcoming legislative priorities related to TCIEA. Jessica and Gina have met with representatives from state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation (TVR), school districts, employment services providers, and family advocacy groups. These meetings have resulted in opportunities to share presentations, provide training, participate in community events, and identify potential areas of future partnership. One example of impact through these conversations is that the team learned that VR and TVR programs often operate without a shared understanding of each other's processes or the scope of their partnership. It was identified that VRC's and TVR offices could not locate the existing Memorandum of Understanding between the two programs within one specific area. This revealed a need for clearer communication and joint messaging about how the programs collaborate to support Tribal job seekers in achieving competitive integrated employment outcomes. Connections have also been made with Employment First experts in other states to learn how they have advanced Employment First in their states and to identify potential areas of collaboration. Highlights were meetings with [Doug Crandell](#), [Katie Wolf-Whaley](#), and [Christa Martin](#). These national subject matter experts offered knowledge, experience, tools and future collaboration.

The EF team also collaborates with partners sharing EF values via the [state](#) and [national](#) Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE). The team continues to engage in various communities of practice with National APSE to ensure awareness of new and emerging best practices as well as federal activities and priorities in Vocational Rehabilitation and workforce development.

The [Employment First website](#) continues to serve as the central hub for Employment First information and resources. During this quarter, updates included new *Did You Know?* materials in English and Spanish, recordings and resources from the Topics & Tactics series, and refreshed pages in preparation for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Posts emphasized the expectation of competitive

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integrated employment and featured shared resources, events, and partner highlights under the hashtags #WeAllWorkAZ and #EmploymentFirstAZ.

In a strategic decision to align statewide efforts the Sonoran Center and Arizona APSE are collaborating on a separate Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC)–funded initiative focused on strengthening Arizona’s disability employment workforce. While independent of the Employment First contract, this work directly aligns with Arizona’s Employment First goals by enhancing provider capacity and professional standards that support competitive integrated employment across the state.

The Employment First Team persists in seeking an accessible platform to host the Employment First training developed in the previous fiscal year. Access barriers to the current LMS highlight the need for an accessible, community-friendly platform. The team is reviewing alternative systems to ensure public accessibility by early 2026. This quality product is needed by the community, and a resolution to accessing it is being diligently sought.

Looking forward to Q2

The AZ Employment First Team is thrilled to finalize and implement a new logo, with the guidance of the Advisory Workgroup, in October. With this accomplishment, the team will develop necessary collateral materials to disseminate messaging, promote EF events trainings, and share the new Employment First brand across the state. The materials are anticipated to be launched for NDEAM.

The team has many presentations and outreach opportunities scheduled for Quarter 2 and will continue promoting Employment First in the community. As the foundational work of sharing the EF message evolves, the focus will evolve to include targeted information, including strategies and resources, for groups as stakeholders integrate EF concepts into their work. Sharing success stories will be an increasing component of overall EF messages to demonstrate the successful outcomes that are possible for all.

As messaging, resources and tools continue to be developed, the Employment First website will continue to evolve. As foundational messaging and resources take root, the team’s focus will shift from awareness to deeper implementation support. This ensures Employment First moves from belief to daily practice. Quality

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information and implementation strategies will be added as developed to ensure job seekers, their families, employers, providers, state agency staff, advocates and all community members have access to anything needed achieve CIE outcomes.

Finally, the inaugural issue of the Employment First newsletter will launch in October, to coincide with NDEAM. This publication will be released on a quarterly basis, offering resources and information to the community moving forward.

Respectfully submitted by the Sonoran Center Employment First Team:

Gina Griffiths, Employment First Coordinator;

Jessica Winchester, Employment First Program Manager;

My Le Sandaine, Systems Change Liaison; and

University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities

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Appendix A

Highlights & Key Activities in Q1

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.9 Informational Events 5.1.5 EF Events & Trainings	Webinars: Employment First Topics & Tactics Coordinator: Gina Griffiths	July 14 th – Arizona’s Employment First Team & EF Planning Focus Group – community feedback received to aid future planning. August 11 th – Arizona Employment First – Moving Forward in Community – shared community feedback publicly. September 8 th – Disability Employment in Arizona & Strategies for Change – education for the community on disability employment policy and strategies to impact policy.
	Presentation: TONVR Welcome to Employment First! Presenter: Gina Griffiths	Gina presented virtually to the Tohono O’odham VR team on August 25 th , as an introduction to Employment First philosophy. The TONVR team is committed to future engagement and seeking additional information to increase collaborative opportunities with VR.
	Presentation: Navajo Nation OSERS, Welcome to Employment First! Presenter: Gina Griffiths	Gina presented virtually to the Navajo Nation OSERS team on September 11 th , as an introduction to the Employment First philosophy. The Navajo Nation team is committed to future engagement.
	Presentation: VR Sups, Welcome to Employment First! Presenter: Gina Griffiths	Gina presented virtually to the VR Region 2 supervisors at their September 23 rd huddle as an introduction to the Employment First philosophy. The VR team is committed to future engagement

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		and will pursue collaboration with the TONVR team.
	<p>Presentation: Foundations of Community Based Instruction: Building Independence Through Special Education</p> <p>Presenter: Loretta Alvarez</p>	<p>On September 24th, Loretta Alvarez co-presented, sharing Employment First messaging, to middle school life skills and cross-categorical teacher with the Amphitheater School District.</p>
	<p>Presentation: Customized Employment in Arizona: AAPPD Industries Committee Meeting</p> <p>Presenter: Jessica Winchester</p>	<p>On September 2nd, Jessica Winchester shared an update on the Customized Employment Pilot and the Employment First Expectations with a group of disability employment service providers.</p>

Highlights & Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
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 • National APSE Public Policy Committee - State – Gina Griffiths • National APSE Public Policy Committee - Federal – Gina Griffiths • APSE Pre-ETS Community of Practice – Loretta Alvarez • Advancing Employment First Community of Practice – Gina Griffiths

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<p>5.1.2 Outreach</p>	<p>Outreach to families and professionals at vendor fair</p> <p>Vendor Rep: Makenna Thuringer</p>	<p>Vendor table sharing Employment First messaging at Arizona's IDEA Conference on August 21-22, 2025. Anecdotally, roughly half of participants engaged at vendor table had not heard of Employment First, indicating the need for continued community outreach & education.</p>
	<p>Outreach to job seekers and employers at job fair</p> <p>Vendor Rep: Jessica Winchester & Makenna Thuringer</p>	<p>Vendor table sharing Employment First messaging at Direct Linkages Accessible Hiring Event on September 24th. Engaged with job seekers and employer vendors.</p>
	<p>Presentation to youth at conference</p> <p>Presenter: Gina Griffiths</p>	<p>In collaboration with the Arizona Community of Practice on Transition, facilitated conversations and presented Together We Thrive: Cultivating Connections - Youth & Family Evening Event. Engaged directly with youth to share the EF message.</p>
	<p>Presentation to professionals at conference</p> <p>Presenter: Gina Griffiths</p>	<p>In collaboration with the Arizona Community of Practice on Transition, facilitated conversations and presented Leading the Way: Cultivating Collaborative Opportunities to Expand Student Success - Professional Evening Event. Engaged with professionals to increase engagement with local Communities of Practice on Transition.</p>
	<p>Outreach to professionals at vendor fair</p>	<p>Vendor table sharing Employment First messaging at the Arizona RSA Conference on September 30, 2025. Anecdotally, roughly 3/4ths of VRCs engaged had</p>

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	Vendor: Jessica Winchester & Gina Griffiths	heard of Employment First. The team offered resources and support.
	Newsletter article Author: My Le Sandaine	Newsletter article National Disability Employment Awareness Month 2025 Reimagining How We Approach Employment appeared in the September issue of the Achieve newsletter
5.1.3 Employer Engagement	The Employment First Initiative is represented by Gina Griffiths on the Governor's Workforce Cabinet focused on Arizonans Living with Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participated in meetings The State of Arizona is adopting an Arizona as a Model Employer initiative that will be formally announced in October. EF alignment is sought on all aspects of this project implementation.
5.1.12 Advisory Workgroup	Advisory Workgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Met on July 17th as focus group to develop consistent EF messaging. Met on September 18th to review the draft talking points and draft EF logos.

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 resources for <i>Did You Know? You Can Work, Keep What Matters & Have More Money?</i> in English and Spanish
	Develop new resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources for National Disability Employment Awareness Month

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		(NDEAM) were developed to be available in October
	Finalized and disseminated <i>Did You Know? You Can Work, Keep What Matters & Have More Money?</i> flyers in English and Spanish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did You Know? You Can Work, Keep What Matters & Have More Money? approved by Advisory Workgroup and posted on Employment First web page.