

Employment First FY 2026 Quarter 3 Report

Prepared by: Sonoran Center for Excellence in
Disabilities In alignment with ISA Agreement No.
DS21003118



JANUARY1- MARCH31, 2026

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE TUCSON

**Sonoran Center for
Excellence in Disabilities**

AZ Employment First Initiative

Overview

AZ Employment First is a statewide initiative that promotes employment as the first option for all individuals with disabilities. This is a person-centered approach that puts the individual with a disability at the center of services and supports. The services and supports are guided by their informed choice and assisted by their personalized planning team. These efforts are supported with training, development of resources, technical assistance, and research. Funded by AZ Vocational Rehabilitation and administered by the Sonoran Center, University of Arizona, the AZ Employment First Initiative seeks to embed Employment First principles across all systems, policies, practices, services and communities to ensure equity in employment for people with disabilities.



FY 2026 Q3 Narrative Summary

Third quarter of FY2026

During Quarter 3 (January–March 2026), the Arizona Employment First Initiative focused on building the infrastructure needed to sustain and scale Employment First across Arizona.

Key areas of progress included:

- Building the foundation for the upcoming FY28 ISA
- Finalizing a statewide messaging and marketing strategy
- Expanding training and community engagement
- Strengthening cross-agency and statewide partnerships

The initiative also increased its visibility through outreach opportunities, webinars and trainings.

Key takeaway:

This quarter represents a shift to building a coordinated, sustainable system that supports Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) statewide.



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Q3 Activities Summary

Third quarter of FY2026



BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE



- Finalized Employment First marketing strategy (with Advisory Input)
- Continued redesign and restructure of Employment First Website
- Provided key input regarding future plans and action items to support the development of the new ISA
- Created an infographic of Employment First as a shared commitment across systems, employers, families, and providers.

👉 *Why it matters:*

Creates long-term sustainability and consistency across systems



- Monthly Topics & Tactics series (Avg. 52 attendees, 84% satisfaction)
- Delivered multiple trainings to:
 - Parents and families
 - DDD Staff (228 attendees)
 - Transition professionals

👉 *Why it matters:*

Improves workforce capacity and consistent Employment First implementation

Q3 Activities Summary, continued

Third quarter of FY2026

OUTREACH AND SYSTEMS CHANGE



- Participated in:
 - Workforce Cabinet
 - Statewide Transition Efforts
 - Partner Presentations
 - Networking events
- Community feedback received via outreach events, networking meetings, and partner collaboration identified ongoing misinformation about:
 - Benefits
 - VR eligibility
 - Work expectations

👉 *Why it matters:*

Reveals where systems need alignment and messaging improvement

ENGAGEMENT



- Supported employer focused initiatives, ensuring Employment First messaging in website and material development (Talent Ready AZ)
- Contributed to Employer Summit Planning (Oct 2026)
- Networked within state and nationally for best practices, tools, and resources
 - State As a Model Employer National Community of Practice
 - Ensuring Employment First messaging in Summer Work Program Employer outreach

👉 *Why it matters:*

Aligns partners to support successful services and job placements

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Q3 AT A GLANCE

JAN 1 - JUNE 30, 2025

EF Topic and
Tactics -
Attendance
(average)

52

Topics &
Tactics –
Satisfaction

84%

Community
Presentations
– Attendance

IN PERSON- 83
VIRTUAL - 348

Community
Presentations –
Satisfaction

70%

5

Community Fairs

230

Website Visits

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

VIDEO VIEWS

253

Newsletter
Listserv

326

Newsletter Open

146 (44.8%)

Key Insights

QUARTER 3

Key Insights
January 1 - March 31, 2026

1. System Alignment Is Increasing —but Requires Continued Coordination

There is growing alignment across state agencies, partners, and stakeholders around the expectation of Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). Engagement through advisory groups, cross-agency initiatives, and training opportunities reflects increased readiness to move beyond awareness toward implementation.

At the same time, this alignment is not yet consistent across systems. Ongoing coordination, shared messaging, and structured collaboration remain critical to ensure efforts are not fragmented and that Employment First principles are implemented consistently.

What this means for VR:

Sustained coordination and leadership are essential to translate growing partner commitment into consistent service delivery and improved employment outcomes.

2. Misinformation Continues to Impact Employment Outcomes

Engagement with educators, providers, and community stakeholders revealed persistent misinformation related to:

- Impact of work on benefits,
- VR eligibility and scope of services,
- and Expectations for individuals with significant disabilities.

These misconceptions continue to influence decision-making and can limit employment exploration and participation.

What this means for VR:

Targeted messaging and education are necessary to ensure that accurate information supports informed choice and increases participation in VR services and employment opportunities.

Key Insights, Continued

QUARTER 3

Key Insights
January 1 - March 31, 2026

3. Workforce Capacity Is Growing but Needs Continued Development

Training efforts, including the Topics & Tactics series and targeted presentations, continue to demonstrate strong engagement and high satisfaction. Attendees are regularly a mix of state agency staff, educators, providers and general community members. Stakeholder feedback indicates demand for more advanced and practical training topics, including job coaching strategies, self-employment, and supports for individuals with complex needs.

This suggests a growing workforce that is engaged, but still building the skills needed to fully implement Employment First practices.

What this means for VR:

Continued investment in technical assistance and support for community training opportunities is necessary to strengthen provider capacity and support consistent implementation of effective employment practices.

5. Data and Feedback Are Informing Strategic Direction

Ongoing engagement with stakeholders, participation in statewide initiatives, and feedback collected through training and outreach are providing valuable insights into system gaps, needs, and opportunities. This information is actively informing the development of strategic priorities, messaging approaches, and future activities.

This includes identifying:

- Key barriers to employment,
- Priority training needs,
- and Opportunities for improved coordination across systems.

What this means for VR:

Using real-time data and stakeholder feedback strengthens decision-making and ensures that efforts are responsive to the needs of the field.

Highlights and Key Activities

Highlights & Key Activities in Q3		
Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.9 Informational Events 5.1.5 EF Events & Trainings	Webinars: Employment First Topics & Tactics	January 10th – Talk About SSA Benefits with Truth and Confidence – Benefits and work SME, Reverend Nicholas Love shared how people with disabilities are empowered to move from poverty to self-determination using the incentives built into the system. February 9th – Supported Decision Making and Employment First– ADDPC Executive Director Jon Meyers explored alternatives to guardianship that better support individual choice and independence. March 9th – Employment First In Action: Reimagining the Secondary Transition Journey– Nelly Sanchez and Melissa Wojtak, both Secondary Transition Specialists with the AZ Department of Education, explained how an Employment First mindset can transform support for youth with disabilities by centering CIE goals in every student's transition plan.
	Understanding Employment First: What Parents Need to Know – Supporting Your Child's Path to Work, Independence and Adulthood	Jessica presented to parents, family members, and circles of support on January 31st for the Amphitheater Public Schools transition event, sharing information on Employment First and resources to support transition aged-youth. This message reached 43 attendees.
	AZ EF & DDD: Supporting Members to Success	Gina shared Employment First messaging and motivation on February 18th during the Statewide DDD Supervisor meeting. This presentation was requested by the DDD Employment Services team and reached 228 DDD team members.
	AZ Employment First and the East Valley Local Community of Practice on Transition	Gina was invited to share Employment First messaging with the East Valley Local Community of Practice in Transition. This group is comprised of community members focused on transition, and 10 people were in attendance.

Highlights and Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.9 Informational Events 5.1.5 EF Events & Trainings	University of Arizona Summer Work Program Employer Information Session	Kelsey and Gina recorded an information session for Summer Work Program (SWP) employers, sharing information regarding Employment First, the qualified workforce available, and the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, as well as including practical information on the SWP experience.
	AZ Employment First: Employment Myth Busters	Gina presented on common Employment Myths during the VR/DDD Quarterly Meeting on March 5th, engaging with 99 state agency staff members to replace myths with facts.
	Mateo TreeTop - From High School to College and Beyond	Mateo was the keynote speaker for the Building Bridges Transition conference at ASU, incorporating Employment First philosophies throughout his presentation to 40 attendees.
	AZ Employment First & AdvoCats	Gina joined an AdvoCats trainee information session, sharing information on Employment First and how they can integrate EF principles in their roles as SWP vocational specialist. Eleven trainees attended the live session, and the session was recorded for those unable to attend.
5.1.12 Advisory Workgroup	Advisory Workgroup	Met on January 15th to review the first draft of the Employment First Marketing Campaign. This was the focus of the majority of the meeting, with initial feedback from the group very positive. The group will share more detailed feedback via survey prior to the next meeting. The group also held preliminary discussions regarding disability employment and sexual harassment as well as plans to formalize the purpose, commitments, roles and responsibilities of the workgroup. Met on March 19th to review updates to the Marketing Campaign based on feedback received via the survey. Most recommendations were approved. The group continued the discussion on disability employment and sexual harassment. Feedback on the purpose, commitments, roles and responsibilities of the workgroup will be collected via survey prior to the next meeting.

Highlights and Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.1 Collaboration	• AZ Governor's Workforce Cabinet Subgroup – Arizonans Living with Disabilities – Gina Griffiths • Arizona APSE – Gina Griffiths, My Le Sandaine, Jessica Winchester • AZ Community of Practice on Transition – Gina Griffiths, Loretta Alvarez • National APSE Public Policy Committee - State – Gina Griffiths • National APSE Public Policy Committee - Federal – Gina Griffiths • APSE Pre-ETS Community of Practice – Loretta Alvarez • AUCD Special Interest Group on Employment – Gina Griffiths	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. These collaborations result in the identification of best practices to replicate in Arizona, the incorporation of the AZ Employment First philosophy into statewide and local planning and collaboration efforts, and position the AZ Employment First team as state subject matter experts on disability employment practices, policies, services and supports. These collaborative efforts offer insight and strategies to advance our Initiative. For example, AZ CoPT offers connections to schools to promote integration of EF in transition. National APSE groups offer insights into grassroots advocacy for change, aligning policy to support outcomes, and ensuring compliance with changing requirements. Gina was elected to the Board of Directors for AZ APSE. This allows for increasing connections within the state community.
5.1.2 Outreach	Outreach to transition-age students and families	Representatives from the Sonoran Center participated in multiple transition fairs and school-based resource events. Employment First materials and messaging are shared at all events: • Marana Unified School District Transition Fair on February 10th • Deer Valley Unified School District Transition Expo on February 12th • Skyline Gila River – College, Career and Job Fair on February 20th • Glendale Union High School District Resource Fair on February 24th • Peoria Unified School District Work & Family Success Expo on March 11th
	AZ Employment First Newsletter	The second issue of the AZ Employment First Newsletter was published on March 30th. The second issue reflected formatting adjustments based on feedback received from the inaugural issue. The lead article focused on the “why” of employment first, and content will continue to inform readers about the power of disability employment and the path to improving outcomes.

Highlights and Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.2 Outreach	Newsletter Article	Newsletter ask The Arizona Employment First Initiative Needs Your Help! seeking support from the community to support projects that advance the Employment First Initiative.
	Newsletter Article	Newsletter article Employment First Updates highlights safety in the workplace and shares resources addressing sexual harassment leading up to Sexual Assault Awareness Month.
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	• Participated in meetings, reviewed language and layout for website being launched by the Governor's office. • Supporting efforts for the Employer Summit – Talent Knows No Limits – Hire Inclusively event scheduled for October 9, 2026, including ensuring inclusive language, making the business case for inclusive employment, and providing recommendations for speakers/panelists.
	Supporting Summer Work Program in Employer Engagement	• Gina provided input on language for collateral developed for employer recruitment for the Sonoran Center's Summer Work Program. • Gina participated in a virtual session that was recorded for SWP employers regarding Employment First philosophies and promoting inclusive recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retention, and employment.
5.1.15 Contract Deliverables	Arizona Employment First Webpage	• Updated resources through Employment First: Topics & Tactics as they were developed • Employment First newsletters and reports have been added to the website to ensure community access to information on activities within the initiative. • The website update continues to be a priority, with language being audited, edited and created to align with the new pages being developed.

Highlights and Key Activities

Deliverable	Activity	Impact
5.1.15 Contract Deliverables	Develop new AZ Employment First resources	• To ensure alignment with funder priorities and requirements, the DES Communications Team and representatives from the Sonoran Center Employment First Initiative came together to discuss branding and funding language on materials. • Resources have been developed by the Employment First team but are in various stages of planning/approval before being deployed. Resources awaiting release include: ◦ A video on benefits and the impact of work ◦ A handout on benefits and the impact of work ◦ Employment First Myths & Facts 1-pager ◦ EF Overview PowerPoint with speakers note (to be locked) to ensure consistent messaging in the community

Looking Forward to Q4 and Beyond

The Employment First team is looking forward to Q4! We have a lot planned to share our message, learn from partners and advance our work. We will finalize our Marketing Campaign, finalize our website update strategy, continue to build out the overall Employment First Strategic Plan, and continue to develop and deploy resources to meet identified community needs, all while continuing to engage our local, state and national partners. Additionally, we will facilitate meaningful community feedback opportunities through a focus group and a survey.

Quarter 4 is also the beginning of conference season. The Employment First team will be attending many quality conferences as attendees and as presenters. These events will be an opportunity to listen, learn, network, and share. We look forward to bringing what we learn back to Arizona to support our efforts!