New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

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NJ Legislative Disability Caucus Advances Employment First Initiative

Caucus Examines Legislation to Create Employment First Commission, Seeks to Improve New Jersey's National Ranking

TRENTON, NJ --The bipartisan New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus convened this week to examine Employment First policies and review legislation that would establish an Employment First Commission to strengthen competitive, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Assembly Majority Leader and Caucus Co-Chair Louis D. Greenwald led the discussion, highlighting New Jersey's need to improve outcomes for workers with disabilities. Currently, New Jersey ranks 39th in the U.S., with 10% of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities participating in integrated employment services, compared to the national average of 22%. When it comes to all I/DD funding for day and employment services in NJ, only 1.6% is spent on integrated employment services, compared to the national average of 9.1%.

"People with and without disabilities want the same things: independence, a sense of purpose, and the opportunity to contribute," said Assembly Majority Leader Louis D. Greenwald. "Employment First is about raising expectations and breaking down barriers so people with disabilities can engage in meaningful work. By establishing an Employment First Commission, we can bring agencies together, align our policies with proven national best practices, and make sure our systems actually work for people. This isn't just about economic opportunity; it's about dignity, inclusion, and recognizing the full potential of every person in our state."

The Employment First framework is a national systems-change initiative promoting the principle that all individuals with disabilities are capable of full participation in integrated

employment and community life. The proposed legislation would create a commission to coordinate statewide efforts, incorporate input from people with lived experience, streamline fragmented support services, standardize data collection, and align New Jersey's practices with federal guidance and high-performing state models. Presenters included Dr. Robert Kimmel, Training and Consultation Specialist for the Employment and Transition Project at The Boggs Center on Disability and Human Development, and Adam Kubler, Coordinator of Employment Services at the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, who outlined the state's progress on initiatives like the expanded Medicaid buy-in program, Project SEARCH internships, and the State As a Model Employer (SAME) program.

"When we look at top-performing states, we see common characteristics: strong legislative support, dedicated funding for integrated employment, robust data systems, and meaningful collaboration across agencies and with the business community. New Jersey has the foundation to build on programs in place. An Employment First Commission would help us capitalize on this momentum, standardize best practices, and ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to the supports and opportunities they need to thrive in competitive, integrated employment," noted Dr. Robert Kimmel.

"The Employment First framework represents a fundamental shift in how we support individuals with disabilities. It's about moving from low expectations to high expectations. The proposed commission will bring together diverse stakeholders, including people with lived experience, employers, service providers, and policymakers to create a coordinated, effective approach. New Jersey has made progress, but we must do more to ensure that employment is truly the first and preferred outcome for individuals with disabilities who want to work" said Mercedes Witowsky, Executive Director of the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Personal testimonies from Scott Elliott, Executive Director of Progressive Center for Independent Living, and Teresa Pirretti, a Support Coordinator with Progressive Center for Independent Living, underscored the transformative power of meaningful employment for individuals with disabilities. The session concluded with a call to action for continued legislative support and coalition-building to expand employment opportunities, reduce systemic barriers, and foster inclusive workplaces throughout New Jersey.

To access the full recording and resource materials from the January 27 meeting, visit: https://njcdd.org/legislative-disability-caucus-schedule-and-recording/.

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About the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

Formed in December 2020, the Caucus is a bipartisan forum within the New Jersey Legislature for lawmakers and their staff to consider the impact on the disability community when shaping all public policies in the Garden State. The Caucus is co-chaired by Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz (D-29), Assembly Majority Leader Louis D. Greenwald (D-6), Republican Leader Senator Anthony M. Bucco (R-25), and Assistant Minority Whip Aura K. Dunn (R-25). Participation in the Caucus is open to all legislators who agree to be champions for individuals with disabilities in New Jersey by meeting with them in their district offices, participating in quarterly education forums, and promoting policies to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities, their families, and organizations that serve, support, and advocate for people with disabilities in the Garden State serve as a resource for the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus. For more information about the Caucus and to get involved, visit https://njcdd.org/legislative-disability-caucus/.