



Media Release

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Task Force Aims to Help Arkansans with Disabilities Work

Arkansas has one of the highest rates of disabilities among working-age adults in the country, and the state should do more to improve access to employment services and to inform disabled Arkansans about employment options, a task force concluded after a year of studying the issue.

The Arkansas Employment First Task Force gave its findings, including more than 30 recommendations on how to increase employment among this steadily-increasing population, to Governor Mike Beebe.

“The task force report shows that with some thoughtful changes to programs and cooperation among state agencies, many more Arkansans with disabilities can go to work and improve their lives,” said Krista Hughes, director of the Department of Human Services’ Division of Aging and Adult Services, who served as task force chairman.

The recommendations focus on steps state agencies can take to move more disabled Arkansans into the job market. Hughes said the recommendations represent a significant shift in policy, from an emphasis on caring for people with disabilities to helping them become more self-sufficient and integrated into their communities.

The task force was created in October 2010 by Executive Order 10-17, which called for state agencies to take action to increase the employment of Arkansans with disabilities. Representatives from state agencies, the federal government, provider associations and advocacy groups were part of the task force.

Nationwide, as well as in Arkansas, disability rates have been increasing for the past 25 years. Among working-age Arkansans, 16.1 percent report a condition that affects daily life and 10.2 percent receive disability benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA).

In December 2010, more than 180,000 Arkansans aged 18-64 received disability benefits from the SSA – this is nearly the population of Little Rock. Many live in poverty.

“Surveys show that a significant number of people who receive disability benefits want to work to escape poverty, be more active, feel productive and contribute to society,” said Hughes. “However, they face many barriers to employment including the fear of losing their safety net of benefits.”

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Pat Long of Hot Springs is an example of how employment can change an individual's life. After high school, Pat lived in a group home and attended a day treatment program. With help from the supported employment program at First Step, a local disability services provider agency, Pat found a job at his local Kroger store.

After more than 20 years, Pat still works at Kroger, but he now lives independently in his own condo. Pat still receives some benefits, but he is much more self-sufficient. Pat also is involved in his community as a member of two civic groups.

Hughes said changing the perception that Arkansans with disabilities can't work will be a gradual process that will take a culture shift and changes to existing state and federal programs that serve the disabled.

The task force adopted the philosophy of Employment First, which means employment with livable wages and benefits is the first and preferred option in publicly funded services for all working age Arkansans with disabilities.

Task force recommendations include:

- Develop online training on disability employment for state and provider agency staff who work with individuals with disabilities.
- Launch an outreach and marketing campaign targeted at Arkansans with disabilities to inform them of opportunities to work and incentives that will enable them to work and keep vital benefits.
- Increase the emphasis on employment in Medicaid home and community services programs to enable more individuals with significant disabilities to get jobs.
- Continue interagency coordination including outreach and marketing, training, coordination of services and reporting outcomes.