



KU Employment First Project Pilot Site Data Final Report

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BACKGROUND

This report details competitive integrated employment (CIE) outcomes for people with disabilities who received support through the Kansas Employment First Pilot Project. The Pilot Project is a partnership between the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), the Kansas University Center on Disabilities (KUUCD), the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment (WISE), and the University of Kansas Institute for Health and Disability Policy Studies (KU-IHDPS). Together, these partners worked to build statewide capacity for supporting competitive, integrated employment outcomes in Kansas.

Pilot project sites were selected through an application process and represented diverse geographic locations across the state. Participating sites sought to expand or strengthen their CIE supports and services for people with a wide range of disabilities, using different service models (e.g., supported employment and Individual Placement and Support). Sites also accessed a combination of mentorship from organizations with successful CIE models across the country and targeted training for frontline employment specialists. Training included ACRE-approved coursework to ensure staff development in core competencies needed to better support individuals who desire CIE.

This report is based on data provided by pilot sites through the WISE data collection spreadsheet as of December 1, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As of December 1, 2025, pilot site data shows 199 individuals with disabilities achieved competitive integrated employment (CIE) across the four Employment First pilot project sites, representing 88% of pilot participants (n = 227) and far exceeding the project's original projected goal of 20 individuals, demonstrating strong capacity for supporting CIE outcomes across diverse regions of Kansas.
- Pilot project participants who achieved CIE had the following characteristics: the majority identified as White (78%) and male (59.5%), with an average age of 33.4 years.
- Participants reported a wide range of disabilities. Based on grouped primary disability categories, the most common included psychiatric disabilities (44.7%) and intellectual and developmental disabilities (40.2%), including intellectual disability, Down syndrome, and autism.
- The most common job sectors for participants achieving CIE were retail and customer service (32.7%) and food service (24.6%), followed by manufacturing and trades (17.6%) and janitorial/hospitality (14.6%).
- Employment outcomes reflected strong access to work but more limited job quality. The average hourly wage was \$13.76, and participants worked an average of 22.1 hours per week, resulting in average weekly earnings of \$312.67.
- Only 7% of participants (n = 13) met or exceeded the Kansas 2024 living wage benchmark of \$21.06 per hour for at least 35 hours per week. Fewer than one in five participants (18.6%, n = 37) worked full-time (≥ 40 hours per week).
- 18.1% of participants (n = 36) reported receiving any employment benefits (e.g., insurance, sick leave, or paid time off), and 3% (n = 6) experienced job advancement during the pilot period.
- Services most commonly received by participants achieving CIE included job development (93%), job discovery (62%), targeted case management (55%), vocational rehabilitation (43%), and supported employment (42%), reflecting individualized and layered approaches to employment supports.
- 82% of participants achieving CIE retained their job and were still employed as of December 1, 2025, with the average length of employment approximately 1 year.
- Overall, the Employment First Pilot Project demonstrated clear success in expanding access to competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities across Kansas. Findings also highlight ongoing challenges related to wages, hours, benefits, and advancement, underscoring the importance of continued system refinement to support long-term economic stability and independence.

PARTICIPATION BY SITE

According to data provided by pilot sites, as of December 1, 227 individuals participated in the Employment First Pilot Project. Of these participants, **88% (n = 199)** achieved **Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)** across the four pilot sites:

- **OCCK:** 75 individuals achieved CIE
- **Compass Behavioral Health:** 68 individuals achieved CIE
- **Down Syndrome Innovations:** 44 individuals achieved CIE
- **Starkey:** 12 individuals achieved CIE

Of the **199 individuals** who achieved competitive integrated employment, **36** achieved **2 CIE jobs** during their participation, and **one individual** achieved a **third CIE job**. Some individuals held more than one job concurrently, while others transitioned to a subsequent CIE position over time. Reasons for job separation included health complications, personal choice, incarceration, relocation, employer termination, and job advancement.

Participants were served across multiple regions of Kansas, with the highest concentrations in Saline, Finney, Ford, and Johnson counties, corresponding to the locations of the pilot project sites.

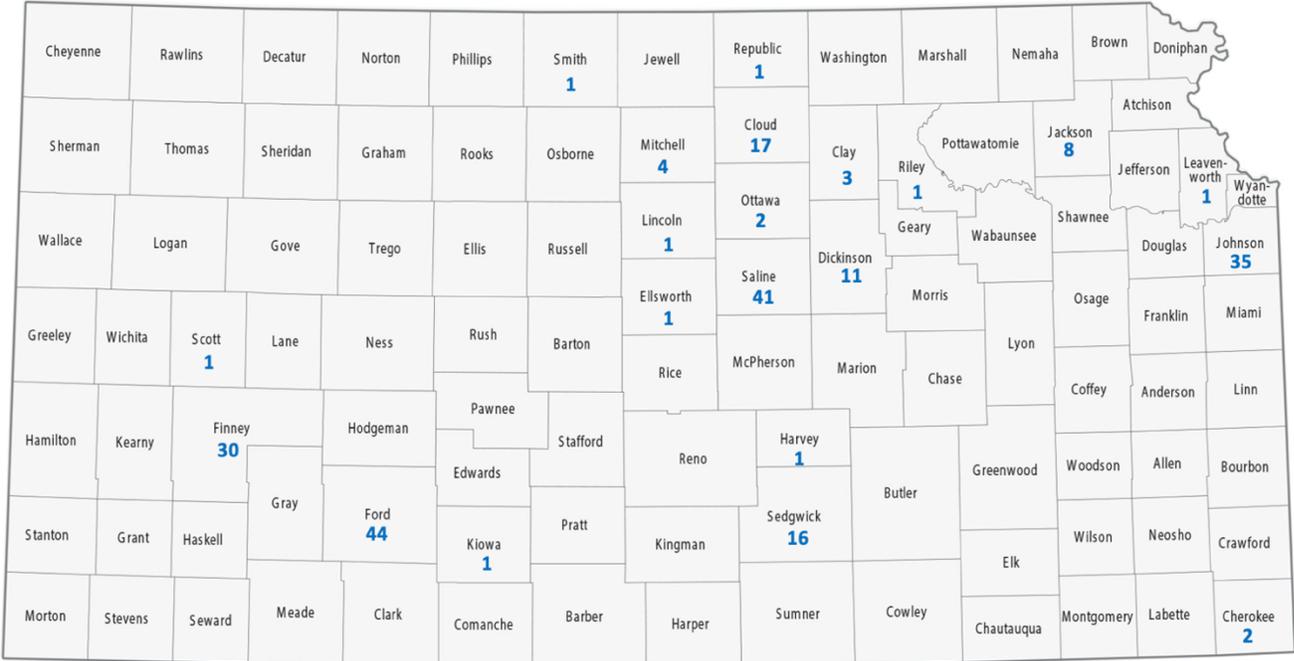


Figure 1. Employment First Pilot Project Participants, by County (n = 222)
Note. County-level counts reflect all pilot participants.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic data were available for participants who achieved at least one Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) outcome (**n = 199**). The average participant was 33.4 years old, with the majority identifying as male and White. Most participants reported speaking English only, while a smaller proportion reported speaking both English and Spanish.

Table 1. Participant Demographics (n = 199)	
Average Age	33.4 (range 16–65)
Gender	59.5% male, 40% female, 0.5% non-binary
Race/Ethnicity	78% White, 14% Hispanic, 6% Black, 1.5% Multiracial, 0.5% Asian
Primary Language	89.5% English, 10% English & Spanish, 0.5% other language

Participants in the EF Pilot Project reported a wide range of disability types. Based on grouped primary disability categories, participants included:

- **Psychiatric disabilities (44.7%)**
Including major depressive disorder (18.1%), bipolar disorder (10.1%), schizophrenia (6.0%), schizoaffective disorder (2.0%), post-traumatic stress disorder (3.0%), anxiety disorders (1.5%), substance use disorders (2.0%), personality disorders (1.0%), and adjustment disorders (1.0%).
- **Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD-related) (40.2%)**
Including intellectual and developmental disability (7.5%), Down syndrome (14.6%), and autism (18.1%).
- **Neurological, sensory, and physical disabilities (12.0%)**
Including learning disabilities (4.5%), seizure disorders/epilepsy (1.5%), cerebral palsy (1.0%), blindness (1.5%), traumatic brain injury (0.5%), Parkinson’s disease (0.5%), multiple sclerosis (0.5%), spina bifida (0.5%), diabetes (0.5%), ADHD (0.5%), and Friedreich’s ataxia (0.5%).

Note. Percentages reflect grouped primary disability categories among participants achieving CIE (n = 199) and may not sum to 100% due to rounding and missing disability information.

Among participants who achieved competitive integrated employment (n = 199), **49 individuals (24.6%)** were enrolled in a Medicaid waiver at the time of participation. Of these waiver participants, **48** were enrolled in the **IDD waiver**, and **1** was enrolled in the **SED waiver**. In addition, **73 participants (36.7%)** were identified as from an HCBS waitlist prior to participation. Among those with available waitlist information, the majority were from the **IDD waitlist (86.3%)**, followed by the **BI waitlist (8.2%)** and the **PD waitlist (5.5%)**.

These data reflect the diversity and complexity of the population served by the Employment First Pilot Project and underscore the need for **continued, customized supports and coordinated services** to support successful employment outcomes across service systems.

ACHIEVING AND RETAINING COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT (CIE)

Among participants who achieved at least one Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) job, the amount of time from first receiving pilot services to first CIE job varied. Overall, a large proportion of participants achieved CIE within the first few months of participation, while others required longer engagement prior to job attainment.

Approximately **21.7%** of participants achieved CIE within **the first 30 days of participation in the pilot study**, and **24.8%** achieved CIE within **30-59 days**, indicating that nearly **half (46.5%)** of all participants obtained employment within the first two months. An additional **10.8%** achieved CIE within **60-89 days**.

It took longer for approximately **45%** of participants. Nearly one-quarter (**24.2%**) achieved CIE within **3-6 months (90-180 days)**, and **18.4%** required **more than 6 months (>180 days)** to achieve their first CIE job. These findings emphasize the importance of allowing sufficient time and flexibility within Employment First initiatives to support participants with varying support needs and employment/career trajectories.

Time to CIE (Days)	Percent of Participants
1-29 days	21.7%
30-59 days	24.8%
60-89 days	10.8%
90-179 days	24.2%
180-365 days	15.9%
>365 days	2.5%

*Notes. *n=157 due to missing date information. Percentages reflect the distribution of days from pilot enrollment to first CIE among participants who achieved CIE. Categories are mutually exclusive.*

A majority of pilot site participants who achieved competitive integrated employment (CIE) either **retained their first job** or transitioned to a subsequent CIE position (**81.8%**), with only **36 of 199 participants (18.2%) no longer employed** as of December 1, 2025. While the length of time participants were actively working toward CIE varied based on when they entered the pilot project, job retention among those who remained employed was strong: **90.3% of participants who retained a CIE job remained employed for at least six months**, with an average CIE job tenure of just over one year.

No longer employed	18.2%
Employed <6 months	9.7%
Employed 6-12 months	25.6%
Employed 12-18 months	40.8%
Employed 18-24 months	5.7%

**n=196 due to missing data.*

SERVICES RECEIVED BY PARTICIPANTS ACHIEVING CIE

Pilot project sites employed a broad range of employment supports and services to assist participants in achieving competitive integrated employment (CIE). Participants who achieved at least one CIE outcome (**n = 199**) often received multiple supports, reflecting individualized and layered approaches to employment preparation, placement, and retention (Table 4).

Employment-related supports were widely utilized. Nearly all participants (**93.0%**) received **job development** services, and a majority engaged in **discovery activities (62.3%)**, indicating substantial emphasis on identifying individual strengths, interests, and employment goals. Over half of participants received **targeted case management (54.8%)**, and more than two-fifths accessed **vocational rehabilitation (42.7%)** and **supported employment services (42.2%)**. Additional evidence-based and exploratory supports—including **Individual Placement and Support (IPS)**, **business tours**, and **job shadowing**—were also commonly used, highlighting the role of experiential learning and employer engagement in the pathway to employment.

Several preparatory and planning-oriented services were received by smaller but meaningful proportions of participants. These included **person-centered planning (22.6%)**, **volunteer experiences (15.1%)**, **residential supports (13.6%)**, and **transportation supports (8.0%)**. A limited number of participants accessed **Project SEARCH (7.0%)**, **Pre-ETS (3.0%)**, **benefits counseling (3.0%)**, or **other internship opportunities (2.0%)**.

In contrast, services related to long-term supports and health-related needs—such as **assistive technology**, **enhanced or specialized medical care**, **home care**, **respite**, **wellness services**, and **meal services**—were not utilized by participants achieving CIE during the pilot period. Similarly, **medication reminders** and **financial management services** were rarely reported (0.5% each). While this pattern may reflect participant needs, service availability, or the timing of supports relative to employment attainment, it may also indicate opportunities to strengthen integration of benefits-related, retention-focused, and technology supports within Employment First initiatives.

Table 4. Services and Supports Received by Participants Who Achieved CIE (n=198[†])	
Service/Support	Received
Job Development	93.0% (n = 185)
Discovery	62.3% (n = 124)
Targeted Case Management (TCM)	54.8% (n = 109)
Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)	42.7% (n = 85)
Supported Employment	42.2% (n = 84)
Individual Placement and Support (IPS)	34.7% (n = 69)
Business Tours	31.7% (n = 63)
Job Shadowing	24.1% (n = 48)
Person-Centered Planning (PCP)	22.6% (n = 45)

Table 4. Services and Supports Received by Participants Who Achieved CIE (n=198*)	
Service/Support	Received
Volunteer Experience	15.1% (n = 30)
Residential Supports	13.6% (n = 27)
Transportation Supports	8.0% (n = 16)
Project SEARCH	7.0% (n = 14)
Personal Care Services (PCS)	5.5% (n = 11)
Pre-ETS	3.0% (n = 6)
Benefits Counseling	3.0% (n = 6)
Other Internships	2.0% (n = 4)
Transition Services	1.0% (n = 2)
Medication Reminders	0.5% (n = 1)
Financial Management Services	0.5% (n = 1)
Assistive Technology (AT)	0%
Enhanced Medical Care	0%
Specialized Medical Care	0%
Home Care Services	0%
Night Respite	0%
Wellness Services	0%
Home-delivered Meals	0%

*n=198 due to missing data. Notes: Some participants received multiple services. Percentages reflect the proportion of participants achieving CIE who received each service.

Overall, these findings underscore the central role of **job development, career exploration, and coordinated employment supports** in pilot participants achieving CIE, while also highlighting potential gaps in access to underutilized services that may be critical for long-term employment stability and advancement such as Benefits Counseling and Transportation.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

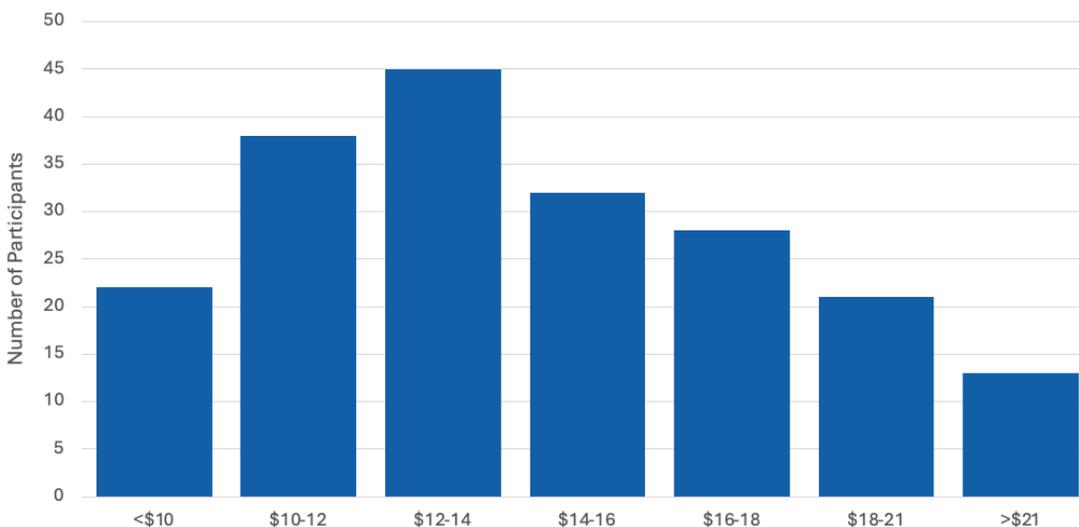
Among the 199 participants who achieved competitive integrated employment (CIE), the average hourly wage was **\$13.76** (range: \$7.25–\$36.00), with participants working an average of **22.1 hours per week** (range: 2–45). Average weekly earnings were \$312.67 (range: \$18-\$1,440). While these outcomes represent meaningful progress toward employment, most participants remained below the Kansas 2024 **livable wage benchmark** of \$21.06/hour for 35 or more hours per week.¹

Only **7% of participants (n = 13)** met or exceeded this benchmark. Fewer than one in five participants (**18.6%, n = 37**) worked full-time (≥ 40 hours per week). Additionally, **18.1% (n = 36)** reported receiving any employment benefits (e.g., insurance, sick leave, or paid time off), and just **3% (n = 6)** experienced job advancement during the pilot project period.

Avg. Hourly Wage (Range)	\$13.76 (range: \$7.25-\$36.00)
Avg. Hours/Week (Range)	22.1 (range: 2-45)
Avg. Weekly Earnings (Range)	\$312.67 (range: \$18-\$1,440)
Participants working ≥ 40 hrs/wk	18.6% (n = 37)
With any benefits	18.1% (n = 36)
With job advancement	3% (n = 6)
Participants working ≥ 35 hrs/wk at $\geq \\$21.06/hr$	7% (n = 13)

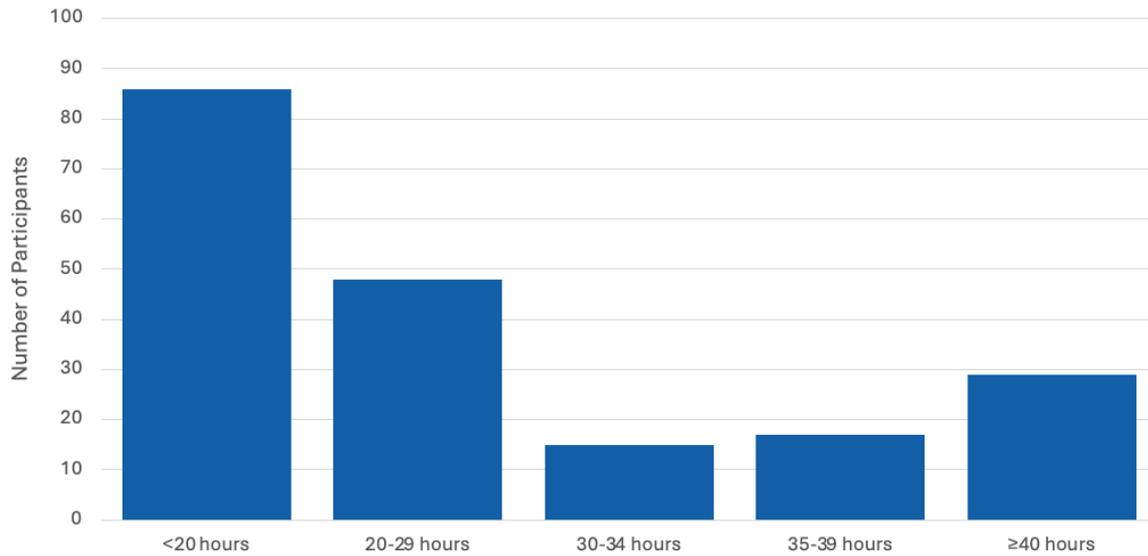
As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, wages and scheduled work hours were concentrated in lower ranges, with most participants earning under \$18 per hour and working fewer than 30 hours per week.

Figure 2. Hourly Wage Distribution for Participants Achieving CIE (n=199)



¹ Glasmeier, A.K. (2025). *Living Wage Calculator*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Available at: <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/20>

Figure 3. Scheduled Weekly Hours Among Participants Achieving CIE (n=199)



Together, these findings highlight both the success of the pilot in facilitating access to employment and the persistent challenges related to **wages, hours, benefits, and long-term economic stability** for participants achieving CIE.

WAGE & HOURS BY JOB SECTOR

Employment outcomes varied by job sector among participants who achieved competitive integrated employment (CIE) (n = 199, Table 6). Most participants were employed in **retail and customer service (32.7%)** and **food service (24.6%)**, sectors associated with **lower wages, fewer hours, and minimal attainment of the Kansas 2024 livable wage benchmark of \$21.06 per hour for at least 35 hours per week** (based on a single adult with no children).¹

In contrast, participants employed in **manufacturing and trades and administrative/professional roles** experienced stronger outcomes, including **higher average wages, longer hours, and higher rates of meeting the livable wage benchmark**, despite representing a smaller share of placements. **Healthcare and support** roles showed mixed outcomes, while **janitorial/hospitality** and **other sectors** were associated with lower wages and limited attainment of the livable wage threshold.

Overall, across all sectors, participants earned an average of **\$13.78 per hour** and worked **21.4 hours per week**, with only **6.5% (n = 13)** meeting or exceeding the Kansas livable wage benchmark.

Table 6. Job Sector Participation, Wages, and Hours for Participants with CIE (n=199)					
Sector	n	% of total with CIE	Avg Wage	Avg Hours	% ≥ Living Wage Benchmark
Retail & Customer Service	65	32.7%	\$12.41	21.7	2%
Food Service	49	24.6%	\$12.53	19.6	0%
Manufacturing & Trades	35	17.6%	\$17.39	24.8	23%
Janitorial / Hospitality	29	14.6%	\$11.46	16.7	3%
Healthcare & Support	9	4.5%	\$16.88	27.3	11%
Administrative / Professional	7	3.5%	\$20.77	26.0	29%
Other / Uncategorized	2	1.0%	\$16.10	12.0	0%
Missing	3	1.5%	—	—	—
All Sectors	199	100%	\$13.78	21.4	6.5% (n = 13)

These findings emphasize a key challenge for Employment First initiatives: while participants are successfully obtaining employment across a range of sectors, sector concentration in lower-wage service industries limits opportunities for economic self-sufficiency. Targeted strategies to expand access to **higher-wage** and **higher-hour sectors**, particularly manufacturing, skilled trades, and administrative or professional roles, may be critical for supporting long-term economic stability and independence for people with disabilities.

¹ Glasmeier, A.K. (2025). *Living Wage Calculator*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Available at: <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/20>

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The Employment First (EF) Pilot Project demonstrates significant success in supporting participants to achieve competitive integrated employment (CIE), with 199 individuals securing CIE across diverse communities in Kansas. The Employment First Pilot Project originally projected that 20 individuals with disabilities would obtain CIE through the pilot project; this goal has been **far exceeded**, with nearly ten times that number achieving employment to date. These outcomes reflect strong system capacity for supporting access to competitive employment when coordinating training, mentorship, and employment supports are in place.

At the same time, findings indicate that employment quality—particularly wages, hours, and benefits—remains an area in need of improvement. Despite robust access to job development and employment supports, most participants earned below a livable wage. Only 13 participants (7%) met the Kansas 2024 livable wage benchmark of \$21.06 per hour for at least 35 hours per week. Participants were most often employed in lower-wage sectors such as retail/customer service and food service, where wages and hours were insufficient to meet the livable wage threshold. Even among higher-wage sectors—including manufacturing/trades and administrative/professional roles—the proportion of participants achieving economic self-sufficiency remained limited.

For context, recent national estimates suggest that approximately **56% of full-time U.S. workers without disabilities earn at least a living wage**,¹ emphasizing the substantial gap in economic outcomes between EF Pilot participants and their nondisabled peers. This contrast highlights the distinction between job attainment and economic stability, and reinforces the importance of addressing both within Employment First efforts.

This gap between job placement and economic stability points to several opportunities for policy and program improvement:

- Strengthen training pipelines and job-matching strategies for roles in manufacturing, skilled trades, and administrative services, which demonstrated higher average wages and longer work hours.
- Expand access to benefits counseling to help individuals navigate trade-offs between earnings and public benefits while supporting long-term advancement and retention.
- Consider supplemental supports or adjusted benchmarks when evaluating livable wage attainment for people with disabilities, who may face higher costs related to health care, transportation, and assistive needs.
- Increase awareness and utilization of work incentive programs such as Working Healthy, WORK, and STEPS, which were used by relatively few participants during the pilot period but may support higher earnings and career advancement.

Ultimately, while the EF Pilot Project demonstrates that people with disabilities can and do succeed in employment when provided with appropriate supports, **sustained attention to job quality is essential**. Elevating wages, expanding benefits, and diversifying sector placement represent critical next steps for aligning Employment First efforts with their long-term goals of economic self-sufficiency, dignity, and inclusion.

¹ Dayforce & The Living Wage Institute (2024). *2024 Living Wage Index*. Available at: <https://www.dayforce.com/Ceridian/media/documents/2024-Living-Wage-Index-FINAL-1.pdf>