



**Employment for People with Developmental Disabilities
Legislative Hearing Testimony
New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities
Commissioner Willow Baer**

May 6, 2026

Good morning, Chairs Fahy and Ramos, and other distinguished members of the Senate. I am Willow Baer, Commissioner of the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

Thank you for highlighting such an important topic and for inviting me to provide an update about the ongoing efforts at OPWDD to make Governor Hochul's Employment First commitment a reality for New Yorkers with developmental disabilities.

Employment First

Employment First in New York State means increasing competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities, equipping people with disabilities to participate meaningfully in the workplace, and making employment the first option and the preferred outcome for everyone. OPWDD is fully committed to this endeavor and is actively assisting people with developmental disabilities to achieve their employment goals across the State. Working and earning a paycheck gives people a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and independence, while becoming more engaged in their communities. Employment and participation in meaningful activities are also essential social determinants of health and, therefore, a priority in our public health systems.

As part of the State's Employment First self-assessment process, led by Kim Ridley's Chief Disability Office, OPWDD identified nine (9) key elements for our Employment First implementation plan, those being:

1. The need to build out more robust employment support in service planning to set employment expectations for people with developmental disabilities;
2. The importance of rebalancing and modernizing day services and supports from more traditional models to those that support and encourage employment as a first option;
3. The value of more timely service authorization and access for people;



4. The vital role of our non-profit providers and need to support capacity and readiness in the field;
5. The impact that realigned incentives and funding structures could create;
6. The importance of service education, equity and financial independence for people receiving services;
7. The need to close data gaps to better track movement throughout the OPWDD continuum of supports and to more closely monitor outcomes;
8. A requirement that we examine barriers that transportation and infrastructure create for people with disabilities; and
9. The partnerships needed with the business community and how to create a better sense of public awareness and reduction of stigma.

In alignment with these values, OPWDD is embracing Employment First as an opportunity to move from more traditional day services to employment and vocational services. Our approach to meeting the Governor's Employment First principles includes a focus on increasing the number of service provider partners that offer vocational and employment services, as well as a plan to expedite the authorization process to improve customer service and wait times for implementation of these services.

OPWDD's Division of State Operations is also strengthening its role as a direct service provider by expanding access to the full continuum of day and employment services and moving away from a one-size-fits-all day habilitation model toward individualized, employment-focused pathways that better align with each person's goals and abilities. To augment this work, OPWDD's State Operations is investing in new capacity through the creation of a Community Partnerships Liaison in the Bureau of State Operated Programs and Services to build employer and community relationships, develop customized job opportunities, expand competitive integrated employment and volunteer pathways.

OPWDD is leading by example in achieving Employment First goals and has hired employees with developmental disabilities to serve as Peer Specialist Support Team. These employees use their lived experience to support OPWDD's Office of Advocacy to support people with developmental disabilities and their families with issues and concerns related to our service system. The Peer Specialist role is also instrumental in providing lived perspective and input on OPWDD policies and procedures, as well as in helping to encourage and advise future self-advocates on how they can impact change in their local and state government.



OPWDD Employment Supports and Services

While Employment First provides a tangible framework for achieving full inclusion in the workplace, people with developmental disabilities can often face significant barriers to achieving competitive integrated employment. OPWDD's continuum of employment programs assist people to overcome those barriers.

OPWDD's vocational services prepare people for employment, build new skills and experiences, and help reinforce skills needed in the workplace. When it comes to our spectrum of support, OPWDD approaches each person's individualized and person-centered plan with the assumption of capability to participate fully in their community, including through competitive employment. Employment plans are tailored to help each person discover what kind of work interests them, how their skills may contribute, and the steps to becoming employed, followed up with support to maintain that job.

This self-discovery and continuum of support includes:

- Day and Community Habilitation programming to introduce career skill-building at community sites or in a person's home;
- Supportive Employment Services (SEMP) which offers job coaching, job development and on-site job support;
- Site and Community-Based Prevocational Services, which are used to prepare people for employment through community work experience or volunteer opportunities;
- Pathway to Employment Program which helps people to develop a plan to prepare for paid work; and
- Employment Training Program, in which OPWDD pays a person's wages for a time-limited work opportunity with a local business that has agreed to a trial period with the potential to hire the person. This resource is meant to pave the way for both the employee and employer to successfully transition to a fully paid position with secured employment.

OPWDD, and its network of non-profit providers, works with each person to match their skills, abilities and interests with a job in the community, provide on-the-job training, and support job retention and career advancement. OPWDD providers are critical



partners in our employment efforts and are embracing a culture shift that prioritizes having a job versus traditional day habilitation programming.

We're also working to increase awareness of OPWDD's employment supports for people who receive our services and their families. Most recently, and in collaboration with OPWDD's Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council, many of whose members are people with a developmental disability seeking employment, OPWDD created an easy-to-follow 'Steps to Employment' Resources Guide to help people with developmental disabilities and their families better understand the path to getting and keeping a competitive job with the services we can offer to help them be successful.

External Partnerships

While OPWDD remains laser focused on advancing employment for people with developmental disabilities, we cannot accomplish these goals alone. Advances in technology vastly increase the types of support available to increase independence and success in the workplace. In her FY 2026-2027 State of the State Address, Governor Hochul committed to increasing inclusive employment opportunities through the creation of the SUNY Albany Assistive Technology Innovation Center, building on an existing partnership among OPWDD, The Office of the Chief Disability Officer, and SUNY Albany's School of Business. The Assistive Technology Center is working to support research, commercialization, and startups that are developing technologies that help people with disabilities and older adults to live more independently and achieve competitive employment goals.

The federal government has also taken note of New York's efforts to make employment a priority for people with developmental disabilities. For the fourth consecutive year, New York State has been designated a "Core State" by the US Department of Labor, Office for Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) for its National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network initiative or "NEON" for FY 2026 – FY 2028. NEON grants are intended to help states increase competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities through capacity-building support, policy development assistance and ongoing mentoring for awardees, allowing us to further build upon Governor Hochul's Employment First directive. OPWDD has served as the lead state agency for the federal NEON grant since April of 2023 and is now the Co-Lead with the Office of Mental Health for the FY26-28 grant.

Finally, Since the Employment First Executive Order was signed in 2024, OPWDD has been focused on reducing the stigma experienced by people with disabilities in the



workplace by educating New York’s employers on the benefits of hiring people with developmental disabilities who are capable and ready to work. Research from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment has shown that people have a more favorable view of businesses that employ people with disabilities and those businesses also benefit by having an expanded workforce pool that contributes to their bottom line.

Breaking stereotypes and hiring stigmas for the 59% of New Yorkers with developmental disabilities who are of working age is an ongoing challenge. OPWDD has dedicated significant resources to public awareness campaigns such as “Works for Me,” “Look Beyond My Developmental Disability” and “EmployAbility,” as well as through engaging videos depicting a wide range of career paths where New Yorkers with developmental disabilities have found successful long-term employment. OPWDD is also an enthusiastic partner and sponsor of the Governor’s annual Disability Rights and Employment Awareness Month (DREAM) Symposium, a two-day event which includes a job fair that brings together job candidates with disabilities and companies that are hiring, offers workshops on resume writing and interviewing, includes a disability resource fair, and highlights assistive technology available.

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Everyone deserves the opportunity to pursue meaningful and gainful employment, and, in New York State, we are committed to making that a reality for everyone. I appreciate the attention that the Senate is giving to this important topic. Your efforts will help grow a vital understanding of the essential role people with disabilities play in the workplace and the importance that work plays in their lives.

Thank you again for inviting this written testimony and for your continued support as we work together to make New Yorkers with developmental disabilities an integral part of our workforce.