



## INTRODUCTION

Congratulations – you have decided to become an advocate! Welcome to the community of individuals, organizations and agencies dedicated to working for positive social change. Being an advocate is a lifelong job; a process that takes patience and determination. Advocacy is about recognizing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”. In recognizing our individual gifts and talents, we have the capability of changing our world. As advocates, we can create change and call for a more inclusive environment for not just persons with disabilities, but everyone.

Of course, advocacy goes beyond just recognizing the need to speak up. It goes beyond just thinking to include action – standing up for something. Writing letters to legislators is a very powerful and effective way of getting across ideas and concerns you may have as an advocate. It is important that we recognize the power of the pen (or keyboard) as well as personal conversations and develop connections with our representatives. As a government for the people and by the people, we must assert our right to be active advocates!

APSE is the *only* national organization with an *exclusive focus* on integrated employment and career advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities. APSE envisions “People with all types of disabilities are employed, pursuing careers and building assets just like people without disabilities.” Its mission is: “Through advocacy and education, APSE advances employment and self-sufficiency for all people with disabilities.” APSE’s goals are to support the following:

- **Real Jobs for All:** Ensure that every individual with a disability has the opportunity to be part of the general workforce and earn a living wage, without regard to their level of disability.
- **Employment First:** Public policies of federal, state, and local governments should be based on the concept of *Employment First* - that employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age citizens with disabilities, regardless of level of disability. Over 19 states currently have Employment First Policies.
- **Shifting of Resources to the Community:** Public resources used to assist and support individuals should be shifted from shifted from facility-based and institutional settings, into the community.
- **Sufficient Resources for Employment Success:** Resources to assist and support individuals with disabilities with their employment needs must be sufficient to provide quality services, and supports as needed for long-term employment success.
- **Promotion of Employment in the Public and Private Sector:** Government should serve as a model employer for people with disabilities, setting an example for the private



EMPLOYMENT FIRST - EMPLOYMENT NOW

sector, in conjunction with efforts to promote employment in the private sector through the availability of necessary assistance and accommodations.

- **Movement out of Poverty:** Too often disability equals poverty. Efforts to move people with disabilities into employment will increase their ability to move out of poverty and into the middle-class, and decrease their reliance on public benefits.
- **Protection of Disability Rights:** The advancement of rights of people with disabilities resulting from the Americans with Disabilities Act, Olmstead Decision, the Rehabilitation Act, and similar legislation, must be protected and fully enforced.

Your advocacy work to advance these goals is critical to improving the employment and lives of people with disabilities.

Legislators have major influence over services and supports for people with disabilities, through funding and policy decisions. The job of legislators is to respond to the needs of their constituents – that means you! It’s important that legislators know that someone is paying attention to the issue of community employment for people with disabilities – otherwise they are likely to ignore the issue or only listen to the other side. Therefore it’s important that strong voices for community employment be heard. This Legislative Handbook will serve as a tool to help you become a better and more confident advocate. Remember, change can start with YOU!