



**DENDROS
GROUP**

2642 University Ave W
Saint Paul, MN 55114

Draft Olmstead Plan Public Comment Meeting Report - Employment

April 8, 2026 - 12:00pm - 2:00pm

Meeting Summary

The April 8, 2026, employment public comment meeting was hosted by Dendros Group virtually via Zoom. The goal of the conversation was to gather public comment on the draft Olmstead Plan employment goals, focusing on employing more people with disabilities in the community. There were seven participants.

Meeting Agenda

Facilitation Team:

- Rich Pennington (Dendros Inclusion Consultant)
- Ken Rodgers (Dendros Inclusion Consultant)

Schedule:

- 12:00pm -12:20pm: Welcome
- 12:20pm - 1:00pm: Presentation on Draft Olmstead Plan and Employment Draft Goals
- 1:00pm - 1:50pm: Public Comment in Facilitated Breakout Rooms
- 1:50pm -2:00pm: Closing, Evaluation and Further Engagement Opportunities

Registration & Attendance

Fourteen people registered for the meeting. Seven people attended and participated in the public comment.

The participants identified as follows:

Perspectives

- Four are persons with disabilities
- Four are service providers
- One is a parent/caregiver of someone with a disability
- One works in a disability-related field

MN County or Tribal Nation of Residence

- One in Clay County
- One in Hennepin County
- One in Nicollet County
- Two in Ramsey County
- Two did not disclose

Age Group

- One 25-34
- One 35-44
- Three 45-54
- One 55-64
- One did not disclose

Gender

- One Nonbinary, Transgender
- Four Women
- Two did not disclose

Race and/or Ethnicity

- 6 White
- One did not disclose

Military/Armed Forces Status

- Five are not a member of the military/armed forces
- Two did not disclose

Experience in the Following Settings

- Two in classrooms only (or primarily) for people with disabilities
- Two in employment only (or primarily) for people with disabilities (for example: sub-minimum wage, sheltered workshops, 14c)
- One in housing only (or primarily) for people with disabilities (for example: group home, long-term care facility)
- One in day programs only for people with disabilities

Goals Overview

The following are the draft goals presented to the participants of this public comment meeting.

Employment Goal 1: More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community.

- Goal 1A: People who receive services from Vocational Rehabilitation Services or State Services for the Blind (VRS/SSB)
- Goal 1B: People who receive both Medicaid waiver services and VRS/SSB services
- Goal 1C: Students ages 16 and up who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

Employment Goal 2: More Veterans with disabilities will have jobs in the community.

Employment Data Goal 1: More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community

Summary

Overview

The following discussion questions were presented to the participants of this public comment meeting.

1. What would make these goals more effective to improve the lives of Minnesotans with disabilities?

2. What would make these goals more effective to better integrate Minnesotans with disabilities in community life?
3. What's missing from these goals?

Participants focused extensively on Employment Goal 1 (More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community) raising concerns about benchmarks, agency accountability, missing elements, and systemic barriers. No comments were made on Employment Goal 2 (Veterans with disabilities) or Employment Data Goal 1 (More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community).

Findings by Goal

Employment Goal 1: More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community.

The current goals prioritize statistical tracking over individual fit and person-centered approaches.

Multiple participants criticized the focus on statistics rather than meaningful outcomes. One stated employment is "not just about getting a job [...] that is aligned with the individual interests and strengths" and noted "this is just about statistics right now - that's not what's going to make people independent." The same participant added "we do not do person-centered right now" and "person-centered should be in this plan."

Another participant pointed out the need to "enable individuals to gain employment" and criticized "focusing on statistics vs. outcomes." A third called for eliminating ineffective programs rather than using them as benchmarks.

Participants raised fundamental concerns about the validity of benchmarks due to reduction in funding and documented ineffectiveness.

Several participants questioned the validity of specific benchmarks. One noted [Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS)] "has been declining [in] the number of people they are serving" and "they're starting to charge for some of their service," asking "Why would we make that the benchmark?"

Another participant asked, "Why are we using that benchmark when those programs do not translate or prepare students for employment?" referring to a report by Dendros (about the community conversation focused on transition aged youth with Arc and Best Buddies from 2025) indicating transition services do not prepare students. A third participant stated they were intrigued by Goal 1C but observed that 100% of students with disabilities completing postsecondary transition planning in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) is already required and represents more compliance than anything.

The plan measures initial job placement but not retention. Transition services are understaffed and of low quality, undermining the pipeline to employment. One participant called to follow up with people who leave employment, noting there is no guarantee about long-term or permanent employment.

Employment goals cannot succeed in isolation. Inter-agency collaboration is lacking. Systemic accountability failures between MN Department of Human Services (DHS), MN Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), and MN Department of Education (MDE) diffuse responsibility and enable blame-shifting.

Multiple participants described coordination failures. One participant described a "terrible experience when three agencies are in charge" and stated Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) "recently, [in] October 2024, stopped supporting people in transition programs" while "VRS is blaming MDE." They observed, "People pointing at each other instead of taking responsibility," and expressed "very little confidence that putting all three agencies in charge will result in action."

Another participant stated, "Clearly define the role that each of the three agencies play," because "having all three agencies, no one takes responsibilities." They requested to "separate who is responsible for what (MDE, DEED, etc.)" and noted they want to see roles in writing.

Goals confined to single agencies cannot address systemic issues that span transportation, housing, and employment. Participants noted how systemic the issues of employment are, specifically when the issue is interconnected with other agencies such as transportation. More interagency collaboration and interagency goals to address these systemic issues is needed.

A participant stated, "Transportation is a huge barrier to employment in rural Minnesota," and gave an example where "busing service was taken down and that prevented all but one employee from getting to work." They concluded, "Goals are great, but there are overarching systemic issues that need to be addressed in relation to employment," and there is "no easy way to get around employment issues without also addressing transportation issues."

Employer education and financial incentives on competitive integrated employment (CIE) must precede job placement efforts. This prerequisite is absent from current goals.

Participants identified employer education as a missing prerequisite. A participant stated, "Businesses don't know what CIE is," and recommended that educating businesses "should be a main goal of VRS and DHS [Department of Human Services]," adding, "We are jumping into the job before we've done the education for businesses."

Another participant raised the role of employers and how they will be incentivized to hire people with disabilities, noting that the Work Opportunity Tax Credit ended at the end of 2025. The expiration of the federal tax credit leaves a gap with no replacement identified.

The system produces administrative barriers rather than solutions. Waivers, fragmented service delivery, and inconsistent information systems create cumulative barriers. A single point of contact throughout the process is requested.

One participant noted that waivers limit the amount of time that clients can work, which makes it difficult to afford things like groceries. Another participant noted that service providers want to hire more people but many people cannot pass a background check, and that service providers do not have the money to pay for more workers.

A participant stated, "Community members are taking it upon themselves to create their own opportunities," and noted that there are too many administrators for funds and more problem solvers are needed. They added, "Not a great experience with VRS. Feels like a lot of people saying no."

Participants noted that addressing support staff shortages is missing from the goals. Going from person to person to get support is difficult and having one person to take someone through the full process would be better.

There are currently multiple places to get information that are not always updated at the same time, nor are the people providing that information always providing the most up-to-date information. They added that students entering the workforce are receiving mixed information and that clients get cold transferred between people, which is a roadblock for them.

Job descriptions and job search platforms create artificial barriers that disproportionately affect people with higher support needs.

One participant called for a focus on accessible jobs for people with higher support needs and noted inaccessible job descriptions that include unrelated requirements such as lifting a certain number of pounds when it is not really part of the job. Another participant noted the inaccessibility of job search programs like the University of Minnesota hiring search process and job boards like LinkedIn.

Funded, paid work experience for students before graduation is needed to replace ineffective classroom-based transition services.

A participant stated, "Hands on experience is the most effective to learn," and asked, "How much money are you going to invest?" They recommended to "make sure students have a job experience" and "make sure all high schools have a funded transition program."

Current targets for measurable goals are perceived as insufficiently ambitious. Statewide averages mask significant geographic disparities requiring regional breakdowns.

A participant stated they would prefer loftier goals for percentages, noting current goals are only 4% or 7%. Another participant wondered if it would be helpful for the state if goals were broken down by regions, with clearer percentages by region, noting differences between greater Minnesota and the metro.

Definitional ambiguity about what constitutes CIE means low-hour work may be excluded. Job retention over time is not tracked, only initial placement.

One participant questioned what will count as CIE, asking if two hours per week would be counted, and noted that for some people that is all they can do. Another participant raised the issue of length of employment, asking whether people remain employed after a year or more.

Structural changes to VRS have reduced referrals without reflecting actual demand. The fate of individuals no longer referred is unknown, suggesting a gap in tracking.

A participant and disability services vendor noted that since VRS was restructured, their organization is not getting many referrals but suspect that is not a reflection of need, and called for better agency and provider collaboration. “[VRS] restructured in the middle of last year and lost a lot of funding. We still haven’t had very many referrals [since then]... where are all those individuals going?... I’m sure that there’s a ton of individuals in our high schools [in Bemidji, MN] who are not getting quality transition services because we no longer can provide it.”

Employment Goal 2: More Veterans with disabilities will have jobs in the community.

No public comments addressing this goal were given.

Employment Data Goal 1: More people with disabilities will have jobs in the community.

Given that Employment Goal 1 and Employment Data Goal 1 are the same for their high level summary, it is likely that the comments made in Employment Goal 1 are relevant to Employment Data Goal 1. No public comments were made explicitly referencing Employment Data Goal 1.

Participant Exit Survey

Participants were invited to complete an exit survey. There were five respondents.

Evaluation Metric 1: This meeting was a valuable use of my time.

- Four participants strongly agree
- One participant agrees

Evaluation Metric 2: I was able to participate fully in this meeting.

- Five participants strongly agree

Evaluation Metric 3: What would have improved your experience today?

- It was helpful to have our facilitator repost the goals as written into our small group to be able to read them while discussing.
- really like the small group discussion it was really easy for me to engage , and share my lived experience and share thing about stories i have heard thou out my work .
- Really nothing-I really appreciated a small breakout room.
- Be able to have more Q&A time with lead agency leaders from OIO, VRS, DEED, MDE