

Alaska Legislature

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Sponsor Statement for House Bill 211

For years, individuals with disabilities have been drastically underrepresented in the workforce. There have been several causes for this, but one overarching obstacle has been the societal mindset that, because someone has a disability, they are incapable of being employable. Thankfully across the United States, this archaic view is changing. Many states have adopted Employment First legislation, which orients the provisions of state services towards those who have a disability to a primary objective and preferred outcome: gainful, integrated employments within the community working with and alongside individuals without disabilities.

The vast majority of people define themselves by the work they do. It is a source of pride and well-being, as well as simply the primary means to survive and thrive financially. Data bears out that individuals with disabilities who are employed live a higher standard of living. Their lives are healthier, which lowers health insurance and Medicaid costs. They are prouder and less dependent on public services because they are more self-sufficient. In Alaska where there is a constant need to find qualified workers, having locally trained and educated personnel is an asset that reduces turnover costs to businesses and state entities alike.

HB 211 will make Alaska an Employment First state. The Department of Health and Social Services, Labor and Workforce Development, and Education and Early Development would have the objective of their programs for individuals with disabilities to be gainfully employed as a result of their services. Public resources would be synchronized to educate, train, and craft an individualized plan for these women and men to succeed in the job market. Each year, these Departments would issue a report to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority that details what progress has been made towards this goal.

HB 211 appreciates the value all Alaskans can bring towards making individuals with disabilities successful professionally and their communities the richer for it. I would respectfully request your support.