Employment isn’t new to people with disabilities. But in the last decade, disability advocates have been successful in rewriting policies and redirecting federal monies toward services that support employment. Until the late 1960s, children and adults with disabilities were placed in institutions by well-meaning medical professionals who thought that confinement with others with disabilities would be best for both the child and their family. In the 1970s, deinstitutionalization occurred. People with disabilities returned to their communities, often living with families or in large mini-institutions. During the day, people participated in either a traditional “day program” or “sheltered workshop.” In the former, activities focused on socializing with peers (all of whom also have a disability), going on community outings, volunteering, exploring hobbies and interests, and building skills necessary to achieve greater independence and inclusion. In the latter, people work in a setting with other individuals with disabilities, typically performing repetitive, labor-intensive, work and for which each is paid a rate based on their productivity, usually resulting in an hourly rate below minimum wage. These options were often preferred by families, in part because of the all too real dangers and potential physical and/or verbal abuse of their grown children outside of a closely controlled setting.

In the last 30 years, expectations of people with disabilities (and of their parents) have grown. No longer is a place that is “safe and clean” enough. People want the same kind of lives as everyone else. And, when given the opportunity and the right supports, persons with disabilities have proven themselves to be capable and committed employees. To meet the needs of those with varied support needs, alternative methods and interventions have been developed to make employment a reality for all. Customized employment, self-employment, and micro-enterprises are all examples of nontraditional employment options.

The recently passed Georgia’s Employment First Act sets forth policies and procedures that make employment (not day programs or sheltered workshops) the FIRST option for people with disabilities. Unless there is a powerful reason it should be bypassed, people with disabilities will receive services that help them identify, obtain and successfully learn a real job.

Additionally, this bill provides for the establishment of the Employment First Georgia Council, a group who will advise government officials on the adoption of an “Employment First Policy.” Specific activities will include developing a training plan for service providers, increasing awareness, evaluating funding, and finally producing a report for the governor with required legislative, administrative, and funding changes, and documentation of statewide best practices to ensure the facilitation of competitive integrated employment is being provided.