

# ***History of Work First Inc.***

*File: History of Work First*

## **Celebrating 50 Years of Service** 2023

**This organization was incorporated in 1973 under the Association for Retarded Children. The name at that time was Program Dawn. The organization was developed by a small group of parents that wanted services for their children with special needs that were leaving the school system and entering the adult world.**

### **1973- Incorporated**

**1975- Programming began in the basement of the community center in Farmington. There were 6 individuals receiving services and 2 staff. The individuals were offered a “Work Activities program.” This consisted of life skills classes (cooking, self care, shopping, reading, money management, and banking) recreational activities (walking, basketball tossing exercises) hobby classes and a lot of rug braiding.**

**1976- The program increased to 12 individuals. As local students graduated from high school it was now known that there was a program that could offer services Mon.-Friday. Western Maine transportation offered all transportation at that time. One more staff was hired in 1976. This staff was a vocational evaluator. The idea that work needed to be the main emphasis had taken hold.**

**1977- The first “work” contract with Forster Mfg. began. It was a Yo Yo stringing job and inserting a spike into a Top job. A compressor was purchased and “work” began. Time studies started and a certificate from the Department of Labor was secured.**

**1980- A building in Wilton was purchased and the program expanded to include a “Work Adjustment” and Fundamental Life Skills component. Work Adjustment was funded through Voc. Rehab. to help find paid work for individuals even if it was “in house” work. The Fundamental Life skills were funded through Medicaid and included individuals with severe needs that were not work ready. The Work Activities program was still being offered with funding from BMR grant money. The program now had 19 individuals served and 6 staff.**

**1980- The name changed from Program Dawn to Sandy River Rehabilitation Center Inc. to better reflect what the service offered.**

**1981- Linda LaRue-Keniston became executive Director after a close bankruptcy experience. The State worked diligently with the Board of Directors and Linda to rebuild the organization and become financially balanced.**

**1981- Staff increased to better serve ratio problems with 20 individuals and 8 staff.**

**1983- Big expansion with Pineland in the very early stages of not expecting more residence and the hopes for institutional downsizing.**

**1983- The building in Strong was purchased to better serve the adult population from the Pinkham Home. (Strong Nursing Home) The building was renovated from 5 apartments to a handicapped accessible facility serving 15 individuals in the F.L.S. program and 5 staff. The Wilton building now served 22 individuals with 3 staff and 2 Administrative staff. 37 individuals total and 10 staff.**

**1984- 11 staff 40 individuals served. Budget of \$105,000.00**

**1998- Purchased the building in Farmington for the purpose of consolidating all services for administrative ease and for better community placement opportunities. Community options and work placement in the community now is the main focus. The Thrift Shop was also moved from a building being rented in Avon in hopes of employing more individuals and continuing the integration goal.**

**1999- Sold the building in Strong**

**2000- (Feb.) Sandy River Rehabilitation Center, Inc. changed their name to "WORK FIRST, INC." to again better reflect the services being offered. Work and community placement is the primary focus of the organization.**

**2001- 62 individuals served with 80% of the individuals receiving some type of community placement/integration program. 31 staff. The Thrift Shop continues to grow offering approximately 10 placements a day for individuals receiving services.**

**2002- 66 individuals receiving services. The Thrift Shop produced enough income again last year to increase the jobs for individuals. 12-20 individuals are now employed at the Thrift Shop and 97% of the individuals served participate in a community placement or community option program as part of their weekly program.**

**2003-69 individuals; 40 staff. Continuing to seek employment in the community and supplementing with a bulk mailing and a sorting and sealing business. The Thrift Shop also remains successful employing approximately 25 individuals (part time).**

**2004-2005- 77 Individuals: 44 Staff. The two wings "North and Middle" merged providing one point of entry that will offer more flexibility in staying responsive to individuals needs. A 20X100 building addition was completed in June 2005. Renovations began in February. New furnishings and an interior face lift were completed in the entire building. A more structured daily check list and documentation system was designed for more accountability.**

**2005-2006- 82 individuals: 48 Staff. In June of 2006, 17.2 acres was purchased. The land surrounds the existing property with a small white house on the front parcel. The house was demolished during a controlled burn training exercise by the Farmington Fire Department. A new 98'X55' Thrift Shop will be built on the front parcel. A picnic area and small trail system was designed and completed for out door and physical activity programs.**

**2006-2007- 84 individuals 50 staff. The new Thrift Shop on Rt 2 and 4 was opened on Jan 29,2007.The new building is about 5000 square feet. A patio was added to the picnic/trail area. A new video was produced on Work First services. A trainer coordinator position was added to the PCP position for training needs. A gazebo was built and it was designated as the ONLY smoking area at Work First.**

**2007-2008- 84 individuals 52 staff. The sheltered work shop segment of Work First services was officially closed. The work that was offered through this program will be offered in many different ways through community opportunities.**

**A second store front in downtown Farmington was opened on Feb.9,2008. It was named "Touch of Class Too." This will offer more work opportunities to many individuals seeking employment. Work First will integrate all possibilities available in this community to continue offering many different types of work opportunities now that the sheltered shop has been closed. A new State of Maine established rate for the waiver programs was created. Most of the individuals receiving FSD were converted over to Waiver. The new Waiver Guidelines and the new established rates for Waiver only created the need to revert back to a two program system at Work First. The two cost centers will again reflect the actual cost of operating two types of programs/funding systems.**

**Work First discontinued offering transportation to and from work for individuals. Western Maine transportation and Community Concepts picked up this service.**

**Work First was again Accredited through CARF. This was the 15<sup>th</sup> year of accreditation. A new parking lot out back holding 26 cars was built by Horne construction.**

**2008-2009- 78 individuals 50 staff. The downsizing began in January. The services to Harris House( ICFMR) individuals will be discontinued on July 1,2009. We gave the organization a 1 year notice so the transition could be smooth. When a staff resigned we did not re-hire a permanent person. We hired some staff as temporary employees to get us through to July 1.**

**A web based documentation system was started. (Therap) 21 computers purchased and a computer lab created.**

**A partnership with Healthy Community Coalition was started. A free healthy screening was conducted and a follow-up will be done at 6 months. The property decided to go "Smoke Free." The entire property is now a non smoking area. A devastating computer crash happened in December 2008. It took over 4 months to**

re-establish the financials. The back up had also crashed. A new system was developed.

**2009-2010- 70 individuals 47 staff. July 1, 2009 the ICFMR program was discontinued because of cost and travel issues. The F.S.D. Free Standing Day Hab was also eliminated due to State changes. The model that was used for years of two programs B & C was combined into one program. The trail system in the back of the property was completed. Both Thrift shops continue to exceed all income expectations. A 3<sup>rd</sup> shop was discussed and plans to open it were developed and approved at the April Board of Directors meeting. The web based documentation continued to grow and become more comprehensive (Therap). All staff can communicate through a secure link (s-com) using Therap. Work First received a gold award through Healthy Community Coalition for its healthy work place policies and procedures.**

**2010-2011- 70 individuals 46 staff. Work First Inc. was selected as the Program of the Year through a MACSP award program. The gold award was again presented to Work First for it's healthy work policies and programs through the Healthy Community Coalition. A third Thrift shop was opened on July 30, 2010 in the Jay Plaza in Jay Maine. It is also call Tough of Class Too (the too representing, also).**

**A new State of Maine mandate was created requiring all staff working with individuals with disabilities to become certified as a DSP (Direct Support Professional) using a web based company called the College of Direct Support (CDS).**

**The Cedar room was converted to a computer lab holding 17-20 stations for all documentation and CDS training requirements.**

**The 50/50 rule that was created by the State was opposed and a law LD28 supported and passed in April of 2010 will eliminate this rule.**

**A Direct Support Professional of the year award was started at Work First along with a celebration of a week to honor all DSP. Joanne Felt received the first award.**

**A new level of staffing called DSP2 was developed to help train staff to respond to the individuals with challenging behaviors.**

**Lest We Forget art exhibit in Augusta celebrating 15 years since the closure of Pineland (State institution) was held. Two individuals from Work First attended with their art work on display.**

**2011-2012 66 Individuals 42 Staff. Three individuals receiving services shared their artwork at the Lest We Forget art exhibit in Augusta in the Hall of Flags. This was a celebration of 16 years since the closing of Pineland State Institution.**

The state still has a freeze on Work Support and Community Support services. The only way an individual can get services is when there is an opening at the State level. (Someone no longer needing the services and opening that slot.)

Work First presented the Lifetime Achievement award to Representative Pat Flood from Maine Association of Community Services Providers for his help in eliminating the 50/50 rule.

Work First participated in a self audit of it's DOL Sub Minimum Wage program.

Wendy Prchlik resigned as the Office Manager in April 2012. Erin Wilcox was hired as the new Office Manager.

A Direct Support Professional of the year award was given to Lorraine Heath and Paula Varney.

Another small computer lab for staff (quiet area) was created off Rm 8 with 3 computers for Therap documentation.

A Non Return policy was adopted for the 3 Thrift Shops.

**2013-2014 : 68 individuals 36 staff** The State of Maine introduced a new assessment tool called the Support Intensity Scale. (SIS) This tool will be used to develop a rate for each individual receiving services from the State of Maine. They will start with section 21 individuals. This rate will change the current structure and the current rates and ratios that are currently being used by Work First.

A new law called Employment First was passed for a 3 year duration to study work as the most preferred option for Maine citizens with disabilities.

The State of Maine required a broker to become part of the transportation system. The new broker is Logisticare.

The board of Directors began a push to investigate as many community projects and meaningful activities that could support our community and integrate the individuals into the local community. Dog biscuits were baked, stuffing dog kongs, cooking classes to make a meal a week for the homeless shelter all started this year. Individuals attending work first also starting assisting United Way in their Buttons for Babes projects and volunteering for Operation Santa Clause was also done.

The 40<sup>th</sup> year celebration was held on Oct. 19,2013 at UMF.

A Direct Support Professional of the year award was given to Martha Sheets.

**2014-2015: 29 staff 11 full 18 part time 65 individuals receiving services 39 full time 26 part time.** The State of Maine continues to develop a new rate setting system using the Support Intensity Scale (SIS) assessment tool to create this new system. Many questions and concerns surround this model.

The State of Maine changed a rule in the MaineCare Manual on October 1,2014. The change disallowed any work support dollars from MaineCare to be used for one to one ratios unless they are getting paid minimum wage. This had a negative

impact on 4 individuals at Work First. They are individuals with significant disabilities and need the one to one support to complete their jobs. Their behaviors and production rates caused a need to pay below minimum wage because their production was so far below the standard of the job. Three individuals lost their jobs because of this new State of Maine rule.

Carole Kane reached her 20<sup>th</sup> year employed by Work First. Mary reached her 25<sup>th</sup> year. They are both incredibly valued employees that offer their unwavering, positive attitudes and dedication.

The custodian position was split into 2 positions to accommodate hiring Connor. An 8 hour maintenances position was created.

A theft of \$750 cash occurred in Feb.2015. The thief was caught on camera and prosecuted.

A bill called Elimination of Sub Minimum wage in the State of Maine was sponsored by The Employment First Coalition (LD1240) Work First opposes this bill because there are still 13 individuals that need this option at Work First. The bill was held over for the next short session to gather more information.

An audit from 2007-2008 was conducted by the State of Maine. They claimed Work First had a payback of \$33,610. Work First paid the amount after appealing the claim.

WorkFirst became a Vocational Rehabilitation vendor. An Employment Specialist/Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor position was created. Michaela McCarthy was promoted to this new position.

A new system offering 50% off a certain colored tag was started in Feb,2015. This has increased the customer base.

A new brochure was created.

***2015-2016: 32 Staff (13 Full Time 19 part time) 65 individuals receiving services (40 full time 25 part time.)***

Work First Inc. was certified for a new program called Vocational Rehabilitation Services in October 2015. A team from the State of Maine came to Work First to determine through an accreditation process if we were eligible to provide this service. We were issued a one year certification. They will return in September of 2016 to review documentation and activity in this area for a new determination of eligibility.

Michaela McCarthy was promoted to lead all efforts in this program. She currently has 4 individuals receiving Voc Rehab services. This program is funded through state funds.

She is also responsible for a program called Career Planning. This is funded through the current Section 21 and 29 Maine Care funds. Michaela has been trained this year in Employment and Discovery techniques, Natural Support Strategies and Job Coaching.

An investigation from the Federal Department of Labor was conducted beginning in March of 2015. The investigation was centered on the 14c special certificate under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). There were no recommendations listed in the final report. The only area that was cited was a back payment need to pay \$58.97 to

**5 consumers. The investigation noted a difference in the prevailing wage from what our team gathered from local businesses.**

**The assessment tool and new rate setting system being developed by the State of Maine that was scheduled to begin on July 1, 2016 came to a sudden halt. The tool being used (SIS) Support Intensity Scale was determined flawed by the State of Maine after three years invested in administering the assessment to individuals with Intellectual Disabilities. The State of Maine continues to search for an assessment tool to measure the needs of individuals with Intellectual Disabilities.**

**An increase of 1% to the Provider tax began on January 1, 2016 on all Maine Care Section 21 and 29 income services. This increase was legislatively disputed and the final result was to increase the provider rates by this 1% to offset the tax increase. This was scheduled to take effect on April 15, 2016.**

**A bill LD1585 to reinstate Free State Park passes for individual groups providing services to individuals with disabilities was passed. This helps Work First in the summer to visit Mount Blue State Park.**

**A bill LD1240 to eliminate the use of special certifications using sub-minimum wage was defeated.**

#### **Thrift Shops:**

**All three shops continue to offer quality items for the local citizens. A new “fill a bag” for a \$1.00 rack is now offered in all three stores. The sale rack helps thin out inventory and offers an opportunity to shoppers to fill a bag for a \$1.00.**

**The Direct Support Professional (DSP) week was celebrated at Work First on September 14 – September 18<sup>th</sup>. This celebration is recognized by most states in honor of the dedicated DSP staff. At Work First, the staff vote for the DSP of the year for their outstanding performance, dedication and commitment to the individuals receiving services. This year Aishah Wolfstone was selected by her peers.**

**This year brought sadness as Work First lost four individuals. Our memories will stay warm and cheer us all as we think of the many years we were blessed with their daily presence.**

**2016-2017 31 Staff ( 9 Full time 22 Part Time) 63 individuals receiving services ( 39 full time, 24 part time)**

**Coordinator of Services (COS) Positions were eliminated for restructuring.**

**Voc. Rehab program was expanded, hired Persephone Barker (Jan.31, 2017) as the Employment/Job coach Specialist. Work First received a 3 year accreditation from the Maine Dept. of Labor Bureau of Rehabilitation Services in 2016.**

**August 17, 2016 the Board of Directors voted to eliminate the use of the 14c FLSA Federal DOL special certificate offering the use of sub minimum wage.**

**On Jan 7, 2017 the use of the certificate was discontinued. All individuals receiving work support services and working in the 3 shops are paid at the new \$9.00 an hour minimum wage. All shops had new work standards and expectations developed for all employees in the shops to follow.**

**A priority list was developed for the staff to follow when working with individuals receiving Work Support services.**

**Sales dropped in all 3 shops. It appeared due to the 50% off daily of a certain colored tag. This system will be analyzed and probably discontinued in the future.**

**LD 967 was passed with a price tag of 12.5 million to be used to increase the rate in Community, Work and Home supports for individuals with intellectual disabilities.**

**Section 29 also had a bill that passed allowing the CAP to double to \$47,000.00 a year to include Shared living residential services. If the individual chooses the residential piece they only will have \$1,000.00 for Community supports. The work support was pulled out separate.**

**A new minimum wage law was passed changing the \$7.50 minimum wage to \$9.00 an hour on Jan.7, 2017. A \$1.00 an hour increase was approved until it reached \$12.00 an hour in 2020.**

**There is a shortage of Direct Support Professionals in the State of Maine.**

**The adaptive outdoor education center opened in Carrabassett Valley in Nov.2016.**

**Individuals and their staff started participating in this program.**

**New office space was created for a large Therap space and a new office for Carole.**

**The old COS office was converted.**

**Erin's office floor was tiled.**

**The Web site was improved and a new board designated feature was added.**

**Kevin Hand a consumer of many years passed away.**

**2017-2018:**

**30 staff: 22 part time staff, 8 full time staff**

**63 individuals being served: 27 part time consumers,36 full time consumers,**

**The Vocational Rehabilitation program was discontinued because of a continued operational loss in September 2017. The career planning was also discontinued because of the difficulty in finding placements in March 2018.**

**LD967 converted to LD924 was unanimously passed by the legislators in June of 2018. This added a 10% increase to the community and work supports.**

**The minimum wage increased to \$10.00 an hour on Jan. 1,2018.**



**A new standards requirement for working at the 3 shops was developed. All employees must meet these requirements. Individuals with disabilities can have assistance from a job coach/staff to meet these requirements.**

**The NET non-emergency transportation brokers refused rides to some individuals for a few months because of their interpretation of the Medicaid rules. This was challenged and the brokers had to start the rides again.**

**Erin joined the Leadership Team in May 2018. Randy Scribner resigned as the maintenance person and Ernie Minns was hired. Lynne was hired as the full time Thrift shop manager in Sept 2017. Sue Cochran was selected as the DSP of the year. Linda looked at 10 possible new Thrift shop sites in other towns. Due to the cost, managing and staffing long distance this effort was discontinued. It was voted by the Board of Directors to place an addition on the existing big store instead. A 58'X25' will be built in the fall of 2018.**

**A new salvage operation began with Skills Inc. and Wilson Marketing in Dec.2017. The salvage clothing will be shipped to Africa, South and Central America.**

**The side and back parking lot was excavated and all the clay removed. The entire lot was repaved.**

**2 new 2018 Dodge caravans were purchased to help in the schedules.**

**A new Work First Quality Assurance program began in July 2017. The leadership visits and observes DSP's while they are working.**

**Hope association is sharing an office for case management.**

**Many special events were scheduled for more meaningful options. Going to Adaptive outdoor center in Carrabassett has been especially successful.**

### **2018-2019**

**33 Staff 9 full time, 24 part time**

**64 Individuals receiving services 25 full time, 29 part time**

**The State of Maine increased the minimum wage to \$11.00 an hour on January 1, 2019. Anne LeBlanc was selected as the D.S.P. of the year by her pers. The salvage operation was placed on hold indefinitely due to the buyer stating the quality was not matching his needs. A new 2018 Ram Cargo Utility Van was purchased with the help of a \$10,000 grant from Penobscot Foundation for Developmental Services. A new 58X25 addition was built on to the 303 Wilton Road Thrift shop. The soft opening was held on April 10, 2019. A beautiful metallic epoxy floor and new lighting has added a new exciting flavor to the shop.**

**Fiber high speed internet was installed through GWI at Work first for a better internet connection.**

**The State of Maine Vocational Rehabilitation program was revamped. They reset the state map and now only offers 4 regions with 4 providers. Work First will be served by Goodwill. The State also now requires background checks be re issued and checked on all existing employees every two years.**

**Janet Mills from Farmington was elected as the Governor of the State of Maine.**

**Work First withdrew as a United Way recipient of funds. Scholarship funds will be offered to only Work First staff and their immediate families. Work First will self-fund this account going forward.**

## **2019-2020**

**The 2019-2020 year at Work First Inc was a challenging experience, to say the least. The horrendous explosion at Leap Inc on September 16, 2019 began a year with unusual and difficult issues. The pandemic that hit the United States in February 2020 had a devastating impact on Work First services as of March 17, 2020.**

**Work First lost a consumer, Peter Campbell on August 22, 2019. This was an unexpected loss and those who knew him were saddened.**

**An explosion on September 16, 2019 was felt at Work First work site. A new building that had just been completed for the Leap organization exploded in the early hours. An underground leak of propane had filled the new basement with a tankful of propane. The entire new building was destroyed.**

**The state of Maine increased the minimum wage on January 1, 2020 to \$12.00 an hour.**

**The Office of Aging and Disability Office (OADS) sent out mandatory self-assessment to verify compliance with the Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) rule. The disability rights Maine will be conducting desk reviews and on-site reviews to look at all practices of organizations providing these services of Maine. This program was delayed because of the pandemic.**

**In March 2020 the Coronavirus became very prevalent in all communities throughout the United States. An expectation list had already been developed by Linda in response to the first outbreaks. This led to a massive lay-off of 30 DSP's on March 17, 2020 and a closure of services to individuals receiving services. All 3 thrift shops were closed on March 19 and didn't reopen till June 1, 2020. The clerks were all laid off during that time. Three staff Linda, Carole and Erin remained employed and worked on the daily response to COVID-19 and the states mandates. Carole and Erin designed a telehealth program to offer some services to individuals using the zoom computer feature. Linda reviewed any opportunities daily for financial assistance, advocating to the state for help. The state did not offer any assistance. A payroll protection plan loan was applied for and secured on April 16, 2020 for \$207,245.00 at 1% for 2 years. This loan was amended to include 24 weeks from the date secured to apply for loan forgiveness. Work First has until October 1, 2020 to apply for forgiveness. The loan could then turn into a grant for the amount forgiven is based on how many wages were paid in the 24-week period and expenses for rent, utility, heat and insurance. It is hoped that at least 50% of this loan will be forgiven. The remainder will be returned per board vote on May 14, 2020 as the payment over 2 years is very high.**

**On June 1, 2020 the shops had a soft opening with shortened hours and only allowing 5 customers at a time to shop. Plexiglas was installed and signs were displayed and face coverings became mandatory. Lynne was rehired on May 18, 2020 with 4 individuals returning to work outback with Lynne one on one for the month of June.**

**Angel returned in late June to assist in designing the new schedules.**

**In July, 6 more staff were re-hired and a total of 25 individuals returned on a part time basis. The 3 stores returned to full hours with 5 customers allowed at the downtown and Jay shop and 10 customers were then allowed at the bigger Farmington shop. As of August 3, 2020 the services and re-hiring of staff will be placed on a freeze until more guidance from the state and CDC share that the risk for COVID-19 exposure has been lifted.**

**2020-2021**

**28 staff (including thrift shop) 20 in Program Supports**

**42 Individuals receiving services but very part time and some are telehealth**

**The pandemic still exists and all aspects of programming have been impacted. Many staff did not want to return to work when their return-to-work order was sent to them. The unemployment has supplemented the usual amount they would receive with an additional \$600.00 then \$300.00 until Sept. 4, 2021. The staff shortage has made it difficult to resume programming for the 13 individuals still waiting to return. Most need assistance with COVID regulations and have more complex needs.**

**The State of Maine increased the minimum wage on January 1, 2021 to \$12.15 an hour. An Earned Leave Law went into effect on Jan. 2021. This allowed all employees that were ineligible for the vacation /sick policy to gain 1 hour of paid leave for every 40 hours worked.**

**The Office of Aging and Disability Office (OADS) sent out mandatory self-assessment to verify compliance with the Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) rule. Many virtual trainings and webinars were attended in preparation of the validation audit. The Disability Rights Maine with the Office of Aging and Disabilities conducted the validation audit on Dec. 21 2020 on the Work Support program and on June 2, 2021 on the Community Support program. The Community Support Program received the report in June 2021 and 13 areas that needed remediation were cited but none were labeled high scrutiny. The remediation plan was sent in to the State on July 28, 2021. The Work Support report has yet to be received from the State after eight (8) months of waiting. Many “new” expectations in how the services will be delivered are being mandated by the State of Maine.**

**The Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) Policy was written and approved at the May 27, 2021 Board Meeting. Additional requirements will need to be added to this Policy to comply with the H.C.B.S. regulations.**

**Thrift Shops: On June 1, 2020 the shops had a soft opening with shortened hours and only allowing 5 customers at a time to shop. Plexiglas was installed, signs were displayed and face coverings became mandatory. Lynne was rehired on May 18,**

**2020 with 4 individuals returning to work out back with Lynne one on one for the month of June.**

**The 2 large garages were completed on Feb. 21,2021. The construction started in 2019 but because of the pandemic there was a halt on the construction. The final cost was \$385,000.00 for the 10 bay garages. These will help especially in the winter. Horne Construction were the contractors. It came out great.**

**This fiscal year allowed the shops to offer more customers the chance to shop. On July 6, 2020 the shops all began to offer the full hours 7 days a week. As the virus became less prevalent the State of Maine business mandates were relaxed. The stop and go lights were dismantled on August 1, 2020. The shop sales were low during this fiscal year because of the State mandates that were still required. We were not using the dressing rooms; the shopping carts were not available and face coverings were required. Many customers did not appreciate these mandates.**

**On July 1, 2021 all shops went bagless.**

**Erin Wilcox, the office manager, resigned on May 21,2021. Leslie Marean was hired to replace her. Mary Rankin officially resigned in Jan. 2021. Thirteen staff that were employed before the COVID shut down resigned or did not return. Staff shortage a really big problem.**

## **2021-2022**

**COVID-19 Pandemic still an issue and still prevalent in the area. COVID-19 vaccinations required to be employed at Work First. Mask and social distancing are still required. Some individuals served are still not receiving services because of this requirement.**

**Staffing: 25 Staff including Maintenance, Office and Leadership. 18 Direct Support (DSP) staff. Thrift Shop: 7 unsupported staff included Store Manager, supported workers 20.**

**Individuals served: 47 individuals. Many very part time.**

**There continues to be a staff shortage with few applicants. Three staff resigned on the same day after the summer paid shut down because of their displeasure in the vaccination mandate and the COVID restrictions. A State Bonus plan was applied for and received by Work First. The State limited the bonus to \$7000.00 per staff. The Board approved the full \$7000.00 for the staff who returned immediately when work First was reopened. A scaled down amount was offered to other staff according to when they returned. A new law was adopted by the State of Maine. For Work First it meant all employees working less then 15.5 hours a week will collect one hour for every 40 hours worked to use at their own discretion.**

**Board meeting were held both virtually and in person with 6 feet spacing for the members attending in person. The Board approved a dental plan offering to pay 80% of the cost. They also approved a new Holiday called Juneteenth Day on June**

**19<sup>th</sup>. All Direct Support Staff wages were increased by \$2.00 an hour to attract applicants and to support current staff.**

**A new service called Community Membership was applied for and accepted by the State of Maine. It offers services only in the community at a 1X1 or 1X2 ratio. Work First is only offering the 1X1 ratio at this time. The individual must be picked up at their homes and returned to their homes. Work First or any Provider owned facility cannot be used for this service.**

**A long-time consumer and friend, Larry Sawtelle passed away after 17 years attending Work First.**

**The Thrift Shops sales have not fully recovered from the pandemic shut down. The plexiglass remains up for the protection of the cashiers. All plastic bags were discontinued because of a state law. All excess income from the shops is now being used to fund the services offered. This money is needed because of the loss in income from not all individuals returning, the cost of gas reaching over \$5.00 a gallon and the wage increases the programs offered are running at a deficit.**

## **2022-2023**

**COVID-19: The State of Maine dropped the mask mandates in August of 2022. The DHHS vaccination requirement continues to be enforced. Work First also dropped the mask requirement except for when any unwell symptoms are apparent. There was no surge in Covid cases after the mask mandate was relaxed. The Health Emergency ended in April 2023.**

**Staffing: Currently 25 staff employed including all positions. Staff shortage and retention for Direct Support Professionals ( DSP) continued to be a concern and a challenge. Three new staff were hired. They are Dylan Martland, Brittany Parlin and Natilee Poliquin. Four staff resigned during this fiscal year. All positions are currently filled with outstanding staff that share exceptional skills and attitudes. Three Long service awards were distributed this year. Richard Miller 5 years, Anne Leblanc 25 years and Linda LaRue-Keniston 45 years were the recipients. Ellen Crocker was chosen as one of the Direct Support Professional of the year through the Maine Association for Community Services (MACSP.) Ellen has worked for 34 years at Work First and has always shared her enthusiasm and joyful self with all the individuals, other staff and administration. She deserved this award.**

**Board: Board members voted to add one additional week of vacation to all employees that have worked for over 30 years. This had an impact on three employees. A new category of 30-50 years was created to the vacation/sick accumulated timetable. The board approved the purchase of two Hybrid vehicles. A 2022 Ford Escape Hybrid and a 2019 Toyota Prius Hybrid were purchased using some of the retainer payment dollars.**

**State:** The Federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has a rule that people who receive home and community-based services and support funded through Medicaid must receive those services in settings that meet specific standards. The State of Maine conducted a two-year review of Maine organizations to assure compliance with these federal regulations. The Board reviewed and approved many policies and procedures to meet the needed standards. Work First was found in full compliance in October 2022. The State has hired a company named Maximus to perform assessments on all Individuals served in section 21 and 29 of the Maine Care funding programs. They will use a tool called the Support Intensity Scale (SIS-A.) These results will be used in 2025 to offer a new program called Lifespan Waiver. This will result in big changes to the delivery of services.

**Thrift Shops:** The sales in all three shops have finally recovered from the Covid pandemic years. The vaccination requirement for clerks and sorters not supporting individuals with disabilities was dropped. Most of the plexi glass was removed. There was an overabundance of donations and non-salable items dropped off during this fiscal year. A new procedure was established requiring drop off of donations only when the shop is open for a review of what's being donated.