

Partners in Employment: Building Strong Coalitions to Facilitate Systems Change for Youth and Young Adults

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A quick look: ■ In 2014, the employment rate for young adults with cognitive disabilities was 20% for ages 16-11 and 41% for ages 22-30. These numbers are almost half the employment rate of young adults without disabilities. Not only are these young adults with disabilities half as likely to be employed, they also experience low wages and hours, averaging 12 hours and \$92 per week. Because of these staggeringly unequal employment rates for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD) established an initiative to help states improve their policies, infrastructure, and collaboration among state agencies and other stakeholders.

Key Findings: ■ Despite a strong desire to work in the community from people with IDD, 86% state they expect to be employed after graduation, but employment outcomes have continued to be poor. Key areas for improvement include:

- ▶ There is a lack of collaboration between key players (education and rehabilitation professionals),
- ▶ Partnerships are rarely effective at state and local levels,
- ▶ Information and service sharing are uncoordinated,
- ▶ There is a lack of student and family professional partnerships,
- ▶ There is an inadequate emphasis on community employment,
- ▶ There is a lack of family engagement and information delivered to parents to support their children in transition, and
- ▶ Many students with severe disabilities lack early vocational experiences, professional development related to transition, long-term follow-ups, and transition practices in schools.

Putting It into Practice: ■ In 2011 the AIDD announced that it aimed to accomplish the following objectives for employment outcomes for young adults with IDD:

- ▶ Develop policies that support competitive employment in integrated settings,
- ▶ Remove systematic barriers to integrated, competitive employment,
- ▶ Implement strategies and best practices to improve employment outcomes of people with IDD, and
- ▶ Enhance statewide collaborations to facilitate the transition process from school to integrated, competitive employment

Over the next two years, eight states were funded to implement the initiative and to help garner change in policy and procedures.

More about this Article (Where to go from here?) ■ The members and stakeholders of the AIDD Partnerships in Employment initiative set out to establish a system that creates sustainable and meaningful policy and infrastructure at the state level. The authors describe a “remarkable” level of commitment by the initiative participants, who participated in and supported the open sharing of challenges, strategies, and successes. Here are some of the lessons learned throughout the initiative:

- ▶ When dealing with changing a system, it is important to commit to a long-term approach,
- ▶ Use data as a communication mechanism: state agencies should harness data to illustrate priorities and progress and to develop common definitions and understanding of employment outcomes, and
- ▶ States should use clear strategies to engage stakeholders

The lessons learned from the initiative will be used in future state initiatives and help create better employment outcomes for those young job seekers with IDD.

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