



Unlocking Opportunities: Successful Transition from Sheltered Workshops to Competitive Integrated Employment for People with Disabilities

Executive Summary

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Historically, **sheltered workshops** emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as preferred support options for adults with significant disabilities, providing stable work environments and gaining strong advocacy from families seeking consistent care for their loved ones (Blick et al., 2016). However, as initiatives shift towards **competitive integrated employment (CIE)**, understanding the perspectives of participants and their families has become essential to manage the transition effectively and align services with stakeholder needs (Francis et al., 2014). The ongoing transformation in employment support requires a comprehensive examination of barriers and strategies to facilitate this shift.

Problem Statement

The potential benefits of CIE—such as improved quality of life and productivity—are well-recognized, yet individuals with disabilities continue to face significant barriers in accessing necessary services. High unemployment rates among this population in states like Indiana highlight the need for systemic changes to achieve **Employment First** policy outcomes (Fyffe et al., 2021; Kessler Foundation, 2015). This research aims to identify challenges and propose actionable strategies to support policymakers and service providers in enhancing CIE opportunities for adults with disabilities.

Research Objectives

Funded by Indiana's Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services (DDRS), this research project focuses on supporting adults with disabilities in transitioning from sheltered workshops to CIE. The objectives are to:

- identify barriers impacting successful transitions to CIE,
- highlight best practices and strategies for service agencies, and
- provide recommendations to inform policy and practice changes that enhance employment inclusion.

Methodology

The research employed two primary methods:

1. **Comprehensive Narrative Literature Review:** The review identified key questions about barriers to transitioning from sheltered workshops to CIE and identified best practices for service providers.
2. **Structured Interviews:** We conducted over 35 interviews with individuals and their families transitioning from sheltered work to CIE, as well as agency staff. Then we coded the themes from these interviews and analyzed them for recurring patterns, aligning findings with the literature review.

Key Findings

The study identified significant barriers and themes affecting the transition to CIE:

- **Systemic Barriers:** Limited vocational rehabilitation services, transportation challenges, and financial concerns hinder employment access.
- **Knowledge Gaps:** A lack of education about CIE among families and service providers reduces awareness and support for integrated employment.
- **Cultural Challenges:** Persistent negative stereotypes and implicit biases towards individuals with disabilities remain obstacles to inclusive hiring practices.
- **Resource Constraints:** Insufficient funding and training hinder agencies' capacity to effectively provide customized employment services.

The structured interviews highlighted several positive outcomes associated with CIE, including increased job satisfaction, the dynamic nature of job placement, and strong social relationships formed in inclusive environments. However, barriers such as fear, limited transportation options, and misconceptions about CIE persist.

Recommended Strategies

To facilitate successful transitions from sheltered workshops to CIE, several strategies emerged from the research:

- **Collaboration Among Stakeholders:** Enhancing coordination between service providers, families, employers, and community organizations to support comprehensive transition planning.
- **Targeted Training Programs:** Developing specialized training for agency staff in **customized employment** and **person-centered planning** to better support individuals' unique needs.
- **Education and Advocacy:** Raising awareness and advocating for legislative reforms to allocate resources and remove systemic barriers.
- **Enhanced Employment Engagement:** Engaging actively with employers to foster inclusive hiring practices and support the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce.
- **Use of Assistive Technologies:** Promoting the use of assistive technologies and providing ongoing benefits counseling to support financial independence.

Policy Recommendations

A key focus of this research was to inform policy changes in Indiana, particularly within the Medicaid waiver system, to enhance support for individuals transitioning to CIE.

Recommendations include:

1. **Competency Development for Staff:** Provide comprehensive training in customized employment and person-centered approaches to empower agency staff.
2. **Transportation Access Improvements:** Utilize Medicaid waivers to fund reliable transportation options, which will address a major barrier to sustaining employment.
3. **Enhanced Resource Allocation:** Shift funding toward integrated employment services, with incentives for agencies to adopt inclusive practices.
4. **Community Partnerships:** Build strong connections with local businesses and organizations to expand job opportunities and support networks for individuals with disabilities.
5. **Legislation Advocacy:** Push for policy reforms that remove barriers and create supportive frameworks for inclusive employment.

Conclusion

The findings and recommendations from this research provide a robust foundation for Indiana's policymakers and service providers to implement meaningful changes in employment support for

Executive Summary/Unlocking Opportunities: Successful Transition to CIE

individuals with disabilities. By addressing identified barriers and adopting the proposed strategies, Indiana can lead in advancing CIE initiatives, fostering greater workforce inclusion, and enhancing opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Through dedicated efforts in education, advocacy, and resource reallocation, this transformation will promote long-term success and fulfillment for individuals as they transition into integrated and competitive employment settings.

References

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