

Final Summary and Recommendations: A Path to Employment Success Workshops DECEMBER 5, 2024

BACKGROUND

The Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities (NE DDC) has prioritized expanding opportunities for competitive employment of people with IDD in their five-year plan. Specifically, the goal states: “By 2026, the Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities (DD) will collaborate with Nebraska DD Network Partners, state agencies, community programs, and other stakeholders to provide resources and improve competitive, integrated, and meaningful opportunities for employment, including self-employment with competitive wages, for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) from diverse locations and identities.”

To further their ongoing efforts to expand employment opportunities, the NE DDC awarded a grant to BKessler Consulting, in partnership with TransCen, to create a sustainable model for building the capacity of employment professionals to effectively engage families to develop an expectation that their loved one can and will be employed.

This project sought to address the barriers described above by providing training to both families and professionals to:

- ◆ raise expectations of what is possible within community-based integrated employment
- ◆ develop specific skills related to exploration, planning, and problem-solving

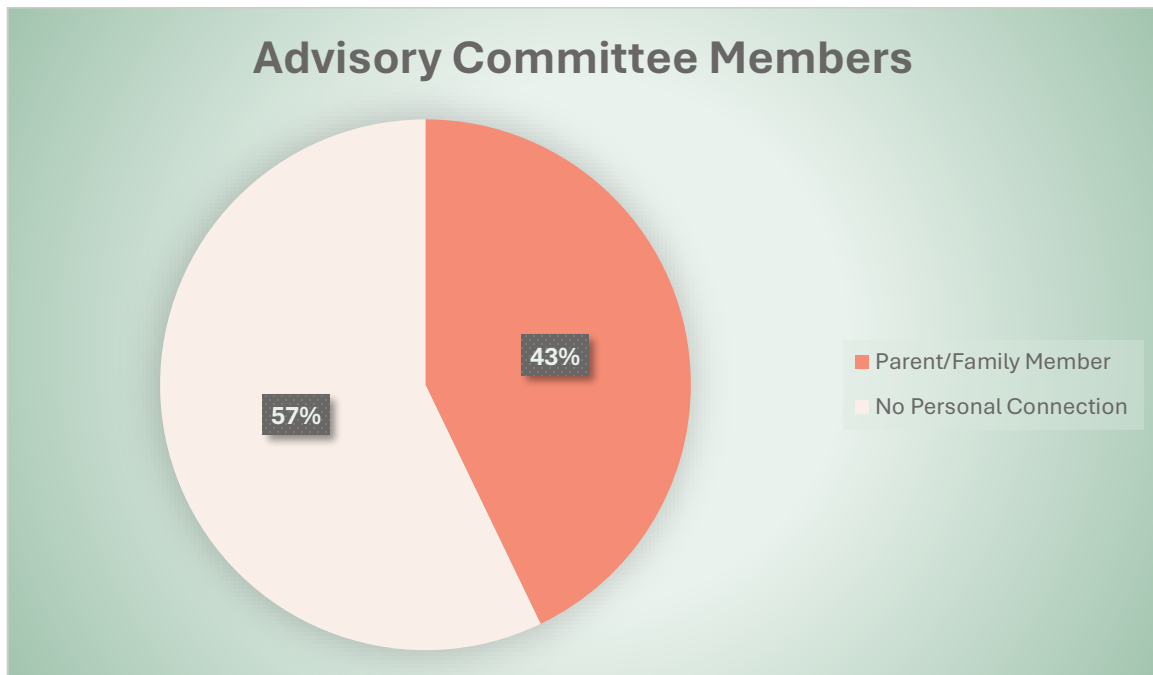
A primary activity of the project included providing a tailored family engagement curriculum and train-the-trainer opportunities to equip professionals who support people with IDD in their employment goals to effectively engage families in the employment exploration and planning process. In-person workshops were hosted in three regions in Nebraska and a virtual workshop was also be made available.

As a result of these efforts, it was anticipated that Nebraska would have a cohort of Service Providers and community partners who have the skills, curriculum, and materials to effectively engage families as allies and supporters in their loved one’s journey to integrated competitive employment. Nebraska would also have an initial cohort of families across several communities who have been provided information and supported to raise family expectations around community-based, competitive employment as a first option as youth transition into community employment. They have been supported to understand and embrace competitive employment as the preferred option and will know how to play a role in helping youth experience competitive, community-based employment.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE SUMMARY

Committee Formation

Throughout the project, the BKessler Consulting and TransCen worked with a local Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives from the NE DD Council, Vocational Rehabilitation, Educational Service Units (specifically transition), PTI Nebraska, and the Provider Association. Despite multiple outreaches, the Developmental Disability agency was unable to be reached and did not participate. Efforts to identify and recruit self-advocates to participate were also unsuccessful. As a result, the Advisory Committee was comprised of individuals who identified as:



All Advisory Committee members described their participation “as a professional.” Participants were primarily female (55%), with all but two participants identifying as straight (that is, not gay or lesbian). Most participants (85%) identified as white or Caucasian, with one Advisory Committee member identifying as Hispanic/Latino. All but one participant was from an urban area.

The purpose of the Advisory Committee was to:

- ◆ map the potential places and partners who can host the workshops for families
- ◆ connect with families and professionals who support them to invite them to the workshops or to become trainers
- ◆ help the project team to tailor the *Imagine the Possibilities: A Path to Employment Success* curriculum
- ◆ make recommendations to the Developmental Disabilities Council for how to make sure the workshops can continue after the project ends

Committee Activities

The committee met a total of four times across the project year. During the first two meetings, the committee provided insight and recommendations to identify dates and locations for the workshops. Advisory Committee members were asked - and were provided with tools to - outreach to their networks to promote and encourage participation in the workshops.

A smaller sub-committee was formed to give input to tailoring the *Imagine the Possibilities: A Pathway to Employment Success* curriculum. (This working group met two additional times to review and provide feedback that was incorporated into the final materials). A brainstorming session was facilitated to support committee members in identifying groups, organizations, or individuals who may be engaged for this opportunity. Advisory Committee members committed to outreaching to these groups.

During the third meeting, results and insights from the initial workshops in Scottsbluff and Kearney were shared, and the group supported the recommendation to shift to a virtual format. Additional brainstorming regarding how to encourage and increase participation was facilitated, and the facilitation team also met individually with several Advisory Committee members and/or their representative groups as needed.

It was determined by the Advisory Committee that offering translation and interpretation to reach Spanish-speaking families was a priority for the final two workshops. As such, the materials for the curriculum were translated (and are now available, along with all English materials). Simultaneous interpretation was offered at the virtual family workshop (though no Spanish speaking families attended) and at the in-person workshop in Omaha.

The final committee meeting included a review and recap of the successes and lessons learned, and discussion of the recommended next steps to scale and sustain the work (detailed below).

Committee Satisfaction and Feedback

Committee members were asked to reflect on both their experience as an Advisory Committee member and the project following the last committee meeting. Of the five committee members who responded to the survey:

- ◆ 40% agreed and 40% strongly agreed that the Advisory Committee was productive and helped to achieve project goals
- ◆ 60% strongly agreed that their thoughts and opinions were taken into consider (another 20% agreed)
- ◆ 80% strongly agreed and 20% agreed that they were satisfied with their experience as a committee member

Members indicated that they felt their contributions to the Advisory Committee – and the project as a whole – were to ensure Nebraska specific focus and collaboration to reach families and professionals.

Forty percent of participants strongly agreed that the Elevating Family Expectations project furthered collaboration of partners who play a role in supporting people with disabilities and their families. Another 40% neither agreed nor disagreed that collaboration was enhanced. All committee members, however, noted that the project did further access to important information for families and was an example of the state working together to “expand services” and to “make improvements and increase employment outcomes for folks with disabilities.”

SUMMARY OF ALL SESSIONS

Attendee Demographics

After four sessions, there were a total of approximately 140 attendees of the *Imagine the Possibilities: A Pathway to Employment Success* workshops. Of those who completed the survey, they identified as:

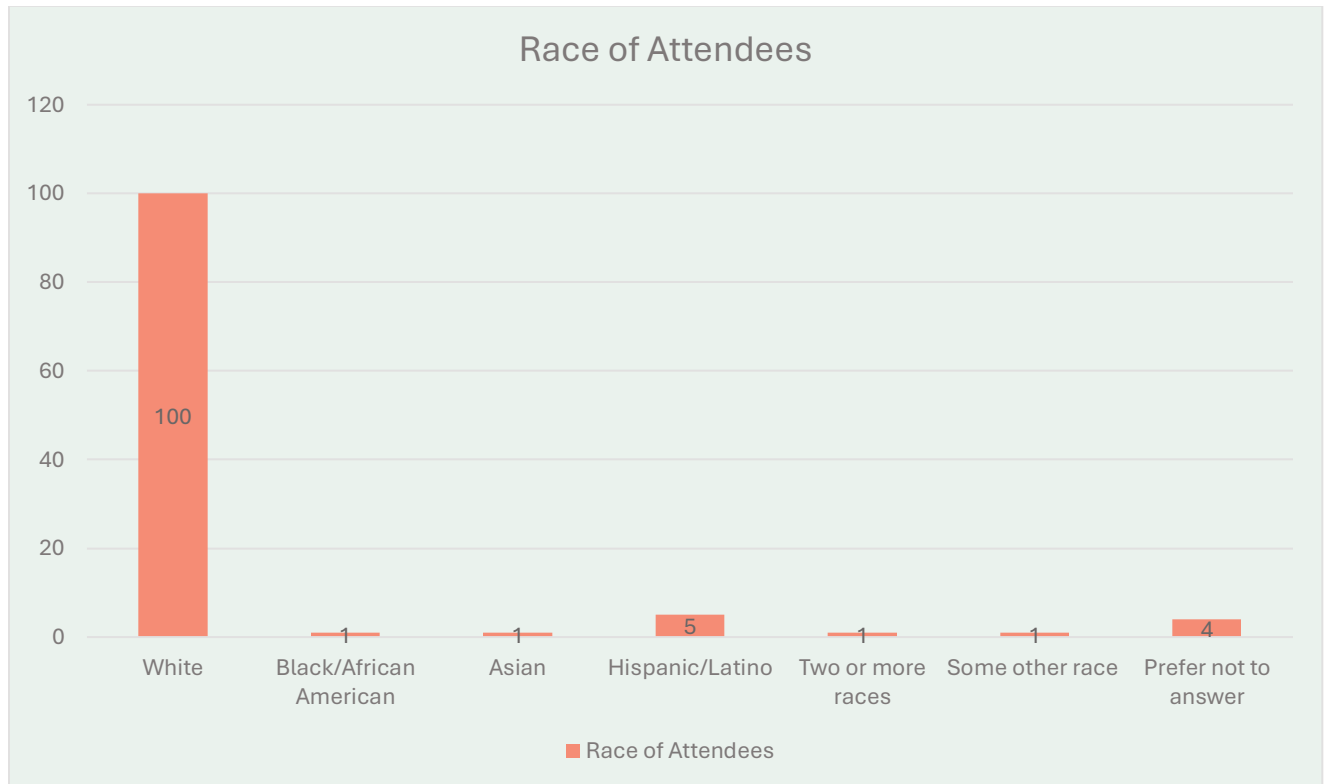


Demographic information of attendees can be broken down as:

- ◆ Approximately 88% of attendees joined the session as a professional.
- ◆ 93% of survey respondents identified as female, 5% as male, and 2% as non-binary.
- ◆ 4 total survey respondents indicated they consider themselves to be transgender, representing 4% of those who answered the survey questions.

- ◆ 80% of attendees identified as straight (not gay or lesbian), 5% as bi-sexual, 3% choosing a different term, 1% gay or lesbian. 11% of respondents indicated they preferred not to say.
- ◆ 51% of attendees were from rural areas (less than 50,000 people)

Attendees were, primarily, white-identifying- with very few respondents representing other racial identities:



Workshop Results

Comparison of pre-and post-survey results indicate that the workshop was very effective in raising expectations related to employment as an option for people with disabilities:

- ◆ 58% of respondents “strongly agreed” that their expectations were raised (all other respondents agreed)
- ◆ 58% of respondents “strongly agreed” that they were more confident in their/their family member/those they support ability to get a job (all other respondents agreed)

Additionally, respondents indicated that the workshop was effective in providing knowledge and resources to support people to pursue their/their family member/those they support’s employment choices and preparation:

- ◆ 52% of respondents “strongly agreed” that they know more strategies for making choices that matter to them regarding employment

- ◆ 53% of respondents “strongly agreed” that they know more ways to help prepare for employment

Comments from the surveys consistently indicated that:

- ◆ Families feel more equipped to envision the future, develop a positive profile related to employment opportunities and skills, and advocate with those who support their loved ones
- ◆ Professionals feel more equipped to engage families in a strengths-based, possibilities-focused conversation regarding employment for their loved one
- ◆ Attendees (people, families, and professionals) appreciated the practical tools and resources that could be immediately – and easily – used in their life and/or work

Overwhelmingly, attendees shared the primary next step of interest to them is ensuring the concepts and tools/resources are shared broadly—especially across all systems of support. Participants were interested in sharing the information themselves with their own circles of influence but also recognized the need for broad dissemination and access to the information and learning opportunities.

Additionally, attendees were excited and motivated to use and apply their learning in their work. Professionals, especially, noted that they were invigorated by the importance of ensuring family engagement is an expected and critical piece of their work. Many indicated that this had not been a primary focus previously and/or that they felt unsure of how to engage families in a strengths-based way. The workshop provided them with both confidence and strategies to do so more effectively.

Observations

Over the course of the four sessions, it was clear that attendees found the information valuable and helpful – in their everyday lives and in their work. Results from the survey demonstrate the effectiveness of the workshop and curriculum to:

- ◆ provide information and support to raise family expectations around community-based, competitive employment as a first option for people with disabilities
- ◆ building the knowledge and skills of family members to help youth experience competitive, community-based employment
- ◆ equip professionals who support people with IDD in their employment goals to engage families in the employment exploration and planning process
- ◆ train trainers with the skills, curriculum, materials, and strategic plans to effectively sustain the promising practice

In addition to these outcomes, a few observations are notable:

Outreach – especially to diverse communities – is challenging and a necessary area for intentional focus.

As noted above, the primary attendance at the workshops – both for professionals and for families – were people who identified as white and who speak English. Despite translation and interpretation, there was a low representation of Spanish-speaking families. Specific outreach, connection, trust-building and outreach with diverse groups (including, but not limited to Spanish-speaking families) is needed. Creation of materials in native languages in one step to increasing accessibility of events but developing strategies that are truly responsive to the needs and preferences of underrepresented people requires partnership with and leadership from representatives of these communities. Establishing local, connected cultural brokers who facilitate relationship-building and provide expertise, and insight will be important for continuing to engage underrepresented families throughout the state.

Families value – and are looking for – peer support and connection.

In each of the workshop sessions – but most especially in the virtual session and in Omaha – families highlighted their appreciation for the opportunity to talk with other families who have had similar experiences. The personal and vulnerable stories shared and the knowledge and resources exchanged were a unique aspect of the workshop opportunities. In Omaha, families stayed to talk and connect with one another for almost an hour after the end of the evening session.

It was noted by those who attended the professional session that there is not currently an infrastructure for connection and support between and among families in local communities. This not only impacts outreach and engagement of families, it also may lead to feelings of isolation and lack of awareness of possibilities. When families have opportunity to connect, they provide both emotional support and valuable knowledge to one another. “Hubs” of connection and shared experience can serve as a way of better reaching families *and* as a source of collective advocacy when needed.

Collaboration and connection among local resources is an opportunity for improvement.

Significant efforts are being made at the state leadership level to increase collaboration among various systems that serve people with disabilities and seek to enhance employment outcomes. In many local communities, however, professionals were unaware of the variety of resources available and/or felt that these supports for people and families were not streamlined to be maximally impactful and effective. In some of the local workshops, professionals highlighted the importance of the opportunity for them to learn about each others’ work. And, in all of the workshops families were often aware of one resource (like the school), but not the “next steps” or the “other systems” they may be able to access (such as Vocational Rehabilitation).

Facilitating opportunities for like-minded professionals and organizations to collaborate in their day-to-day work and to effectively partner to ensure an integrated and supportive approach at the local level is an important step to enhance employment outcomes.

Implementation support is necessary to “make it stick.”

Excitement about the concepts of raising expectations, engaging families, and building capacity was clear throughout the sessions. Professionals, especially, were eager to engage in discussion about *how* to apply these concepts in specific situations or contexts. The desire to continue to momentum and to ensure that the training expanded to implementation within teams and programs was one of the primary “takeaways” of all of the mapping and action planning discussions. It was noted, however, that making sure these practices became the expected approach would require changes in policy, definitions of quality/outcome measurement, and ongoing training within organizations. These – and other steps – are important aspects of the process for adopting innovation, and require focused action, buy-in at all levels, and coaching and support. While further training and exposure to the *Imagine the Possibilities: A Pathway to Employment Success* curriculum is important, supporting professionals and organizations to truly integrate the concepts and practices is also critical.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Utilizing the Curriculum

The *Imagine the Possibilities: A Pathway to Employment Success* curriculum materials are available in English and Spanish, and include:

- ◆ PowerPoints for 3 Modules
- ◆ Presenter notes to accompany PowerPoints for 3 modules (*English only*)
- ◆ Session Worksheet
- ◆ Positive Personal Profile
- ◆ Charting the LifeCourse Trajectory

These materials were shared with participants, are currently available via a shared google file ([linked here](#)) and can be used to continue to train others in formal or informal settings.

Discussion from the Advisory Committee identified collaborative opportunities for:

- ◆ The Parent Center and Educational Service Units to integrate the training into:
 - ◆ upcoming parent workshop opportunities
 - ◆ “Chat and Chow” sessions for transition-age youth
- ◆ Leveraging the Revision Action Grant to host additional activities/training workshops

It is recommended that these materials be hosted and promoted both on the Nebraska Council for Developmental Disabilities website, and the Educational Service Unit Transition resources web-page.

Fostering Implementation and Follow-Up

In addition to continuing to host and facilitate workshops, the Advisory Committee was particularly interested in determining strategies to connect with families and ensure appropriate follow-up and support. This priority, along with the lessons learned regarding the need for increased local collaboration among those who support people on their employment journey *and* enhanced engagement of families, the facilitation team would like to recommend a two-prong approach for continued elevation of family engagement as both an outcome of and a strategy for enhancing employment outcomes.

Implementation Coaching and Support

Maximizing the impact of the curriculum is more likely to occur with an engaged and motivated group of people, who have the resources and a plan for long-term implementation. In addition to casting a “broad net” within a community, “going deeper” with a few organizations or groups that can then implement, and influence is necessary to create ongoing transformation.

Working directly with invested groups or organizations – with their buy-in and support to both ensure staff attendance, engage families with whom they are connected, and develop in a strategic implementation plan – is a necessary strategy, given the current context of outreach, connection, and collaboration in smaller communities. This approach would allow for modeling the implementation of the concepts within the curriculum, development of aligned policies and procedures that will sustain this implementation, and the ability to demonstrate improved employment outcomes.

Through implementation coaching and support, the capacity of the “system” is further developed to ensure families are meaningfully engaged in the employment process. This engagement has been shown to improve individual outcomes, *and* is an effective strategy for addressing the other recommendations in Dr. Lisa Mills’s report: *Necessity or Luxury: Supporting Nebraskans with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to Join the Workforce and Contribute to Nebraska’s Economy*.

Local Collaboratives to Connect Families and Strengthen Partnerships

Simultaneous to equipping groups and organizations, focused community development efforts that build connections between and among families, and increase collaboration among invested parties are needed. Establishing “hubs” that understand and are responsive to the context and priorities of local families and the community, and can implement creative strategies to foster family connection, peer support, and information sharing are ways to:

- ◆ “reach youth with IDD early, focus on increasing competitive integrated employment (CIE).”
- ◆ [raise] “expectations of people with IDD within publicly funded service systems that serve people with IDD”

As families are connected to and supported by one another and equipped with information about what's possible and how to use the existing resources available – the local groundswell for quality employment supports and services grow. So too does the social capital and local collaboration that ensures an integrated array of supports (rather than relying only on eligibility specific services). Establishing local Family Networks are anticipated to result in:

- ◆ More connected and empowered families (through peer support and knowledge and resource sharing)
- ◆ Enhanced belonging and opportunities for employment in local communities (through focused community development)
- ◆ De-siloing the current employment “system” at the local level - where it appears people are “aware of” each other but not “connected to” each other (through strategic communication and collaboration in day-to-day work)
- ◆ Collective advocacy and partnership (of all invested parties) in ongoing initiatives – at both the state and local level

The Family Network model is described in more detail in the Appendix. It is recommended that Nebraska consider collaborative opportunities for establishing and funding the development and support of local Family Networks throughout the state.

Appendix A: The Family Network Model

(Brief) Purpose of a Family Network

Leveraging family peer support for community development improves support for families, raises expectations, and changes community. Peer support not only improves the social connectedness and sense of resilience among families - it can also empower families to change the communities where they live and begin to envision more possibilities in life. Connecting families with each other in ways that encourage them to see and share their gifts and address community challenges together results in improved quality, increased collaboration, and expanded access to support within that community. Families who have the support of other families and the infrastructure of a Network can work alongside community organizations and resources to address both access and equity.

Locally based networks can expand resources in a way that is responsive to community-specific strengths and gaps, which is critical. This is especially important when considering two things:

1. Not all people and families are eligible for paid/government-funded services. Those who are eligible may not be equitably served. And still, others may not know services are available or how to access them.
2. Each community is different; what is available and how people with disabilities or those navigating their mental wellness journey are welcomed (or not) into non-disability community spaces, events, and resources vary. Local community-driven networks that expand education and awareness can lead to increased options and opportunities for places, spaces, and support that accept, value, and welcome all people.

Key Elements of a Family Network

To increase local community capacity, social connectedness, and empowerment of families, Family Networks must be formed by a diverse association of families who support one another *and* work together on local community development priorities. Sharing of roles and responsibilities among people and organizations (based on individual gifts), while ensuring cross-training and collective effort will ensure that the success and sustainability of the network (or access to supports for local families) is not dependent on one person or entity.

Networks are comprised of two key elements:

- ◆ **Peer Support:** Central to the model is the idea of peer support, where families support each other through shared experiences, advice, and emotional backing. This creates a network of mutual assistance and understanding. It intentionally facilitates opportunities for families to connect with each other and build authentic mutual relationships over shared interest, shared life stage, shared identity and/or shared experiences - the same ways people who do not carry labels develop relationships.

- ◆ **Community Development:** The model relies heavily on the involvement of the broader local community. It recognizes that families are part of a larger social fabric and that community resources and connections are vital for effective support. It does not focus only on mutual relationships among engaged families, but also the capacity of the greater community and its resources to welcome and support all families.

Outcomes of Family Networks

As Family Networks amplify the strengths and contributions of local families and community resources, expected outcomes include both those related to family well-being and those related to local community culture and capacity. Each local network should be responsible for identifying the outcomes contextually meaningful to their local community. A few shared outcomes for all Family Networks are highlighted below:

Outcomes for Families	Outcomes Withing/For Local Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Higher expectations for their loved one ◆ Increased confidence and supports to navigate life experiences ◆ Increased education and awareness of supports/navigation ◆ Increased joy ◆ Increased belonging ◆ Increased advocacy skills ◆ Increased social determinants of health ◆ Individualized outcomes based on local, family priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Increased accessibility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging of community resources ◆ Outreach across systems ◆ Increased collaboration in communities ◆ Partnerships with local community resources ◆ Local involvement of community organizations and businesses ◆ Recognition of the local family network as a resource

Family Network Infrastructure

Local family networks should both be funded to do work in their local communities, and to participate in a statewide consortium with other local networks. Each funded local network maintains autonomy and decision-making in their local community while also being part of a statewide Consortium of Family Networks. Through the Consortium, local networks would receive support and technical assistance to implement their individualized scopes of work and collaborate with other local networks. These opportunities for information and idea sharing, as well as providing “on the ground” insights from their local community, may require collective action (whether by the consortium and/or in conjunction with the previously described advocacy coalition). The Consortium would provide structure for shared areas of focus and reporting while continuing to support and facilitate locally driven and individualized scopes of work.