

NECESSITY OR LUXURY?

Supporting Nebraskans with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to Join the Workforce and Contribute to Nebraska's Economy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the methods and findings of a study undertaken to assess and better understand current employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the State of Nebraska. This study also included a focus on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the history of policy, practice and outcomes leading up to the current situation. Overall, the study was undertaken to identify strategic recommendations that the State of Nebraska and other key stakeholders can consider for implementation to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for Nebraskans with IDD.



When considering why the State of Nebraska and key stakeholders for people with IDD should

prioritize improving competitive integrated employment opportunities and outcomes at this time, the unprecedented labor shortage facing the State of Nebraska and its business community cannot be ignored, with scores of entry-level positions going unfilled or unreliably filled due to high turnover rates. The combination of record labor force participation and record unemployment has created the serious shortage of workers to grow the state economy further. The labor force shortage is fast becoming the “single most important” issue facing Nebraska. The lack of workers will slow economic growth according to Christopher Decker, an economist with the University of Nebraska at Omaha.¹ The shortage isn't limited to one industry, sector or level of worker. Businesses struggling realize “there's many causes and there's going to have to be multiple solutions.”² While there is no single solution to this incredible challenge to the state's economic growth goals, there is a clear need to embrace strategies that have not received serious consideration or investment in the past, which includes ***enabling people with IDD to become part of the Nebraska workforce.***

¹ Source: Omaha World Herald Jan 20, 2022.

² Source: <https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/ja/news/news-articles/number-one-business-problem-labor-woes-continue-in-nebraska/> retrieved December 3, 2022.

People with IDD are considered to have some of the most significant impacts of disability, as compared to the broader population of individuals with disabilities in our country. For people with IDD, access to **Supported Employment** services is typically considered essential to obtain and maintain competitive integrated employment. Indeed, Supported Employment was originally developed for this population.³ Thus, lack of access to these services and/or lack of utilization of these services can almost certainly be primary explanations for low labor force participation rates among people with IDD. Looking back as far as 2010, evidence suggests Supported Employment services⁴ to support the participation of Nebraskans with IDD in competitive integrated employment have been used in a very limited way by individuals with IDD. This low utilization appears to be the case even though, over the years, elements of Supported Employment could, under the Medicaid waivers, be authorized and provided in a variety of ways and under a number of service categories.⁵

Information gathered from key informants and through review of available public information led to identification of the primary barriers to significant expansion of Supported Employment

services and in turn, competitive integrated employment opportunities for Nebraskans with IDD. The following were identified as key barriers to the significant expansion of Supported Employment services for people with IDD:

- The perception of people with IDD in the broader community and among Nebraskan employers
- Expectations of people with IDD within publicly funded service systems that serve people with IDD
- Lack of effective strategies in person-centered planning for individuals with IDD and their families/guardians to facilitate informed choice about competitive integrated employment
- No clear incentives but clear disincentives for Nebraskans with IDD to choose competitive integrated employment
- Historically restrictive policies governing the availability and provision of Supported Employment services with some key restrictions still remaining
- The blurry intersection of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Medicaid waivers in the provision of Supported Employment services to people with IDD
- Implementation of Supported Employment services does not always follow best practices
- Perceptions about the cost of Supported Employment and its lack of cost-effectiveness as a service option for people with IDD

³ Supported Employment was first identified and defined in the *Developmental Disabilities Act of 1984* as “Paid employment which (i) is for persons with developmental disabilities for whom competitive employment at or above the minimum wage is unlikely and who, because of their disabilities, need ongoing support to perform in a work setting...”. See: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/98th-congress/house-bill/5603> retrieved December 21, 2022.

⁴ Prior to 2011, Supported Employment service, funded through Medicaid for Nebraskans with IDD, was called Integrated Community Employment (ICE). From January, 2011, ICE became a sub-category under Day Habilitation service although ICE continued to be the service title associated with Supported Employment.

⁵ In the IDD Medicaid waivers, over the years since 2010, elements of Supported Employment services could be provided under Integrated Community Employment (ICE), Day Habilitation (Day Supports) and Community Living services.

Each of these barriers is discussed in detail in this report. Additionally, the results of data collection for individuals with IDD already working in competitive integrated employment are presented and discussed. These results illustrate the outcomes of Supported Employment services. Analysis of the cost-effectiveness of Supported Employment services is also presented. Common assumptions about the level of job coaching individuals with IDD require to maintain competitive integrated employment are compared to the results of data collected on just under 200 individuals with IDD currently working. These individuals collectively worked over 12,000 hours in the eight-week period for which data was collected during 2022. They received job coaching only 43.7% of the hours they worked. This translates into an average job coaching cost per hour of Supported Employment (an hour working in competitive integrated employment instead of alternative services) that is less than half of the reimbursement rate typically paid for an hour of job coaching services.

These promising outcomes are occurring despite the fact that the predominant reimbursement structure for job coaching services is fee-for-service, a payment methodology that incentivizes the opposite of what constitutes best practice in the delivery of Supported Employment services. Additionally, these outcomes are occurring

despite the fact that, **while the history of Supported Employment services in Nebraska is not significantly dissimilar to other states, Nebraska’s history does not yet include a truly comprehensive, intentional and visible effort involving key partner state agencies and key stakeholder partners acting together on a comprehensive shared plan, using resources of all partners in a coordinated way.** Where efforts like this are evident in other states, more progress has been made on increasing and sustaining competitive integrated employment outcomes.

Nebraska has a significant opportunity at this particular point in history because of the positive relationships between leadership in the key state agencies, an unprecedented need and opportunity for individuals with IDD to join the general workforce, and the availability of Supported Employment services that, with key changes to improve access, effectiveness, and to further improve cost-effectiveness, could deliver the improved outcomes desired.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Develop a collaborative plan among all key partners to more strongly and intentionally promote, to employers and the general public, the value of individuals with IDD as members of Nebraska's workforce.
2. Stakeholders, with leadership from key state agencies and other organizations, should collectively seek the new Governor's involvement in promoting the value of individuals with IDD as members of Nebraska's workforce with Nebraska's business and industry groups and employers.
3. Advance the State of Nebraska as a model employer, by intentionally developing competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities including people with IDD.
4. Nebraska VR And DDD should update and expand their current memorandum of understanding (MOU).
5. Ensure uninhibited access to publicly funded Medicaid HCBS Waiver Supported Employment services for eligible individuals with IDD, when the needed service(s) are not timely available through Nebraska VR (or if a student is still in high school, through special education services funded under IDEA).
6. Promote uninhibited, equitable access to publicly funded Vocational Rehabilitation Supported Employment Services for People with ID/DD⁶
7. Public funders of Supported Employment services should collaborate to ensure effective Supported Employment practices by implementing competency-based qualification and/or training expectations for staff delivering Supported Employment services.
8. Reach youth with IDD early, focus on increasing competitive integrated employment (CIE) post-secondary outcomes in Individualized Educational Plans, and promote the use of peer mentors to seed the expectation of a working life in adulthood
9. Identify available short-term funding that can be invested in the provider network and workforce which can support increased opportunities for competitive integrated employment for people with IDD
10. Engage key informants for this study in a one-day summit to discuss this study's findings and recommendations, and determine what consensus can be reached about how a collaborative initiative could move forward to increase competitive integrated employment outcomes for Nebraskans with IDD
11. Maintain commitment to evolving the comprehensive strategy over time.

⁶ Public Consulting Group. *Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Services Provider Town Hall Supported Employment Service Rates* (June 17, 2022).