



Maintaining a Focus on Employment in Tough Economic Times

The State Employment Leadership Network is a multi-state technical assistance collaborative of the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services in partnership with the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts/ Boston and funded by participating state developmental disability agencies.

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The current downturn in the nation's economy significantly impacts the ability of state agencies to maintain needed services and supports to persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). State budget deficits are severe and growing, forcing policymakers to struggle to maintain necessary supports for vulnerable individuals with disabilities. During this period of financial crisis, it is essential that critical components of the service delivery system be maintained to ensure that citizens with developmental disabilities do not become marginalized from society by losing supports they need to live, work, and participate in their communities.

State developmental disabilities agencies made important gains over the past several years, decreasing the numbers of children and adults living in segregated institutional settings, increasing opportunities for community participation and involvement, and expanding access to employment in regular community jobs. During the past three years, 16 state DD agencies launched initiatives designed to improve the employment outcomes of individuals with DD receiving publicly funded services through the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN).

While progress is being made in finding meaningful jobs for individuals, the current economic times make it very difficult to hold the focus on previously set employment goals and maintain the momentum within state agencies, services providers, and community employers. SELN state representatives discussed the challenge of continuing to pursue integrated employment outcomes during this economic downturn at a recent meeting. The following "talking points" are offered by participating state officials to guide and assist decision-making during this critical period.

Stay the Course

It is important that state DD agencies not lose track of their long-term goals to improve employment outcomes for individuals receiving support.

In maintaining a focus on expanding community-integrated employment, there are two primary questions to keep in mind as states consider their options:

- (1) How does the system itself continue forward momentum during tough fiscal times?
- (2) What message and guidance do we want to provide to service providers, individuals, and families?

Build Infrastructure

The work of building infrastructure can and should continue. Many aspects of infrastructure can be accomplished with existing resources, e.g., re-writing service definitions. The bad economy and tight fiscal times won't last forever (really, they won't!).

Focus should be placed on maintaining employment policies and practices, emphasizing employment-related services and funding within agency budget priorities, increasing provider flexibility where necessary, and using the state's bully pulpit to underscore the importance of employment.

By continuing these systems change efforts, states will be well positioned to aggressively move forward on expanding employment even further when the economy improves. Additionally, by maintaining this focus, systems are sending a clear message to individuals, families, and service providers: Employment is a long-term priority for the system, and not just a fad that is going away because times are tough.

Emphasize the Cost Effectiveness of Employment

Tight fiscal times will require state officials to make a better case for community employment as a valued, cost-effective service. This entails state systems using and sharing available data and information for policymakers and legislators demonstrating the cost benefits of community employment in terms of reduced reliance on long-term supports and public benefits, increases in tax revenue from working individuals, etc.

A number of research studies have examined this issue and, while there is still much work to be done in this area, results to date have generally shown that supported employment is a cost-effective service. Developmental disability systems may wish to particularly familiarize themselves with the work of Robert Cimera from Kent State who has published several articles on the topic. The findings by the Council on Quality and Leadership regarding the correlation between working and quality of life may also help in making the case to continue to focus public resources on integrated community employment. (See *CQL Data Quarterly* # 5, "It's Not Working," at <http://www.thecouncil.org/resources/article.aspx?id=663&terms=data+quarterly>.)

Continue Job Development – Jobs are There for Persons with Disabilities

Over the last 30 years, we learned that employment for persons with disabilities is influenced more by the networking and creativity of job developers than the rate of employment in an area.

While unemployment for the general population has risen, people are still being hired for jobs, and some business niches and geographic areas have been less affected than others.

The view that “now is not the time” to focus on employment, may be based in part on an assumption that people with disabilities are at the back of the line in terms of job opportunities. If there is going to be a true shift by service systems and society as a whole to view individuals with developmental disabilities as fully participating and integrated members of society, it’s important to believe that people with disabilities have as much right to jobs that are available as anyone else. State DD agencies should therefore send a clear message to service providers about the expectation to continue to assist individuals to find and succeed in employment, and to not stop placement efforts because of a blanket mis-assumption that “no one is hiring.” Programs providing employment assistance to individuals with disabilities can’t stop doing their jobs – in fact, they need to do their jobs better than ever in terms of networking, being tuned in to business trends, and being more creative in terms of placement options. (And like other job seekers during these times, people with developmental disabilities may have to settle for less than the ideal job.)

Review and Refine Your Message to Employers

The message and approach to business these days may change from “Are you hiring?” to “How can we help get you through these tough times?” Individuals seeking a job and those assisting them need to reinforce and stress in their interactions with employers the qualifications of the job seekers and how they can meet current business needs. More aggressive use of the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit and similar financial incentives may help to increase employer interest, as well as using strategies such as job carving as a way to respond to employer.

Ultimately, what is required is that service providers need to practice excellent customer service with businesses more so than ever.

Strengthen Supports to Individuals Currently Working

For individuals currently working, DD systems should urge service providers to increase services and supports to them and to their employers. Service providers also need to stay more attuned to business developments to ensure that the employer continues to see the employee with a disability as a valued member of the workforce. If the business is considering cutting back, service providers need to be as pro-active as possible.

Safeguard the Rights of Individuals with Disabilities to Employment and Unemployment

If a person with a developmental disability is impacted by the economic downturn, it is important for DD systems to remind individuals, families, and service providers about the individual’s rights in such situations.

If an individual’s employer is in the process of making job cuts, the individual should be treated similarly to all other employees, and his or her rights should be respected, particularly in terms of work-related protections enumerated under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (e.g., an individual should not be singled out for a layoff because of a disability).

If an individual is laid off, he or she should file for unemployment benefits, like any other individual who has lost a job, assuming the work is performed directly for an employer who pays into the unemployment trust fund. (In some cases, individuals may actually work for the service provider as part of a subcontract, and therefore may not be covered by unemployment.) If someone loses a job, s/he needs to be supported to process the disappointment and keep optimistic about future success in another position. It is important that DD systems and service providers be sensitive while working closely with individuals and families to be as supportive as possible, maintain a positive message about community employment, and to assure them that despite temporary setbacks due to the overall economic conditions, employment in the community will continue to be pursued and supported.

Maintain a Lasting Focus on Employment

Even in the best of economic times, people with developmental disabilities participate in the workforce at a low rate, and there has been little correlation between these rates and overall economic conditions. Economic conditions cannot be allowed to become one more reason to hold off on pushing forward a community employment agenda. Now might not be the best time, but if we continue to wait for the “right time,” it will never happen. If we remain dedicated and focused on employment for individuals with developmental disabilities, we will see them increasingly participating in the workforce. They will enjoy the clear benefits and quality of life from having a job in the community.

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*This article is reprinted from the March 2009 issue of **Community Services Reporter (CSR)**. CSR, published monthly by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disability Services (NASDDDS), covers state and local policy and program news concerning individuals with developmental disabilities. CSR is distributed electronically and available by subscription (see <http://www.nasddds.org/Publications/index.shtml>).*