



Office of Special Education and
Rehabilitative Services



Office of Disability Employment Policy



A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – A PATHWAY TO COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Employment — paid work — leads to economic opportunity, equity, and independence. Individuals with disabilities optimize their ability to enjoy these benefits of employment through careers and jobs available to all individuals that provide competitive earnings (wages equal to or exceeding applicable minimum wage rates), integration (interaction with coworkers and others without disabilities similar to that experienced by their non-disabled peers while performing their job duties), and opportunity for advancement (i.e., “competitive integrated employment”).¹ Individuals with disabilities also strengthen their economic security through employment that provides health insurance and paid leave. Furthermore, the employment of individuals with disabilities benefits our communities and our nation as they maximize their skills and talents and contribute fully to our economy.

However, far too often, individuals with disabilities are unemployed, underemployed, or employed at low wages because society often views their potential with low expectations. Community engagement, supported by a variety of service systems, enables individuals with disabilities to expand skills and experience so that they may secure high-quality and personally satisfying careers and jobs and the benefits of employment.

This brief paper, targeted to both policymakers and service providers, presents a joint Federal vision for community engagement. It describes why this vision is important and how it may lead to better employment outcomes, as well as identifies the types of supports necessary and available through multiple service systems to facilitate community engagement for individuals, including youth, with disabilities. Maximizing all opportunities for community engagement through collaborative and coordinated service planning and delivery that support personal interests and goals keeps individuals on the path to competitive integrated employment.

¹ For further information about “competitive integrated employment,” as defined in Section 7(5) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and 34 C.F.R. 361.5(c)(9), see frequently asked questions titled [Criterion for an Integrated Employment Location in the Definition of “Competitive Integrated Employment” and Participant Choice](#), published as RSA-FAQ-22-02 by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration on October 29, 2021.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community engagement means participation in activities in the community that are chosen by individuals with disabilities and offer meaningful opportunities for learning and expanding skills critical to employment and independent living. Community engagement leads to social interaction and the development of personal and professional relationships. Opportunities made possible through participating in community activities may provide a pathway to employment for young adults transitioning to adult life and for adults who want to work, and such opportunities are an essential complement to competitive integrated employment. For individuals seeking to improve their employment potential, community engagement fills their day with activities and learning opportunities that are individualized; provides a sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging; and results in sustained relationships with others in their neighborhood and community.

Engagement in the community provides opportunities to:

- **Build relationships and social networks.**
Social networks create opportunities for individuals to make connections with others and to reap the mental health and psychological support that come from interacting with others. By participating in social networks, individuals develop a sense of belonging in the community. Social networks also provide an opportunity to identify people in the community who can serve as mentors and help individuals connect with employers. Social networks often provide the primary source of information about non-advertised job opportunities and personal connections that enrich each individual's work and other areas of life.
- **Sharpen workplace social skills.**
By interacting with others in the community, in different environments and activities, individuals may learn to relate to people of different ages, cultures, languages, and personalities. By engaging in the community, individuals also may learn to advocate for themselves in work environments.
- **Learn work skills.**
Individuals may explore what kind of work would be a good job fit through direct real-world experiences and build a resume of such experiences based on their interests and choices. This may include volunteering or temporary work as a precursor to full- or part-time competitive integrated employment.

There are limitless opportunities for community engagement, such as attending continuing education classes to pursue hobbies and personal interests that also may support employment; volunteering, for example, with a food bank or animal shelter; helping an elderly neighbor or family member; using the computer at the library; shopping in stores; going regularly to a fitness center; and joining community service groups and faith-based organizations; or other engagements that provide meaning and purpose specific to the individual. Brainstorming with people who know the community may assist in identifying a wide range of opportunities that are meaningful to the individual.

Individuals with disabilities do not need to choose between working and engaging in the community as both may be pursued simultaneously. The amount of time each person works may vary widely—from exploring work possibilities, to working a few hours a week, to full-time employment. Community engagement activities provide additional opportunities for individuals with disabilities to develop skills and competencies, gain confidence and a sense of purpose, and enhance their independence, which helps them to work at their full potential.

While community engagement may occur throughout an individual's lifetime, the expectation and experiences needed to support independent living, community engagement, and employment should start early in life and increase as individuals with disabilities mature. In the early years of life, children's interactions outside the home occur in the context of family. As children become more social and active during the beginning of formal education, families, teachers, and other service providers should develop a vision for a future of work and independence. As they enter adolescence, children should engage in career exploration opportunities in the community that foster self-determination and individual decision-making about their future. Work-based learning experiences, such as serving as a volunteer, may encompass learning responsibility, developing financial literacy, traveling independently, and developing social skills important in the work environment. These and other work-based learning and education-related experiences may help build an individual's resume.

To effectively expand opportunities for the employment of individuals with disabilities, community engagement should be:

- **Individualized.**

Successful community engagement activities are based on the choices, interests, strengths, and needs of each individual with a disability. For example, a student may be interested in participating in after-school sports or a young adult may desire to work with animals or help people who are ill, providing opportunities that would foster engagement with others.

- **Interactive.**

There is a difference between simply existing in a community and engaging in that community. Through community engagement, individuals with disabilities interact with other community members of the individual's choice, including routine interactions with others who get to know the person through shared experiences and from whom the person may learn. It provides the individual with the opportunity to develop and strengthen a sense of purpose directed toward personal goals based on personal preferences. For example, working with a garden club to improve a neighborhood park, delivering meals, volunteering at an animal shelter, taking care of a neighbor's lawn or dog, participating in virtual service learning projects, and visiting regularly with residents of a nursing home may help the individual develop new social and work-related skills and open doors to paid employment. Group activities foster opportunities for individuals to connect with others and experience a sense of accomplishment and belonging.

- **Supported.**

Successful community engagement may include facilitation, coaching, and mentoring. The service provider's role frequently is to facilitate for individuals with disabilities access to

community activities and services consistent with their individualized goals, to provide coaching during interactions and activities, and to connect them with others in the community who may provide coaching and mentoring.

WHAT SERVICE SYSTEMS SUPPORT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Engaging in community life requires planning and support by every service system that serves children, youth, and adults with disabilities. Education, vocational rehabilitation, employment, workforce development, independent living, social security, physical and behavioral health, developmental disabilities, and other home and community-based services (HCBS) may provide complementary services and supports. Successful outcomes require systems to work together. Purposeful and appropriate braiding, blending, and sequencing of services and supports across these systems, to the extent consistent with applicable laws, may enhance their seamless provision for the individual. The type, location, and length of services needed and preferred, as well as the individual's age and eligibility for benefits and services, influence and help to determine the multiple service delivery systems available for a particular individual.

For example, formal and informal assessments, such as discovery methods, may assist individuals with identifying goals, strengths, and interests related to employment and provide a foundation for person-centered planning. These assessments may be provided through special education, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce systems as well as through Medicaid-funded HCBS and some mental health services. Similarly, these same systems can provide support for eligible individuals to engage in career exploration, work-based learning (including volunteering and service learning), and other activities supporting the development of workplace self-advocacy, independent living, and workplace skills.

For community engagement to expand employment opportunities, service providers should coordinate planning and service provision. This is particularly important for the success of youth transitioning from school to post-school activities. Providers may expand opportunities for community engagement that lead to employment opportunities in several ways. By having staff, including job developers and job coaches, trained in customized employment strategies, providers may use discovery methods to better understand an individual's interests, skills, and abilities, which may lead to exploring potential employment opportunities in their community. Once a person's interests and employment goals are identified, they can begin building skills and experiences through community engagement opportunities that develop relationships with potential employers and other individuals in the community and that may lead to employment. To support skill development related to competitive integrated employment, community engagement also may initially involve volunteer opportunities for causes that are relevant to the individual's personal interests to build experience for a resume and lead to increased opportunities for paid employment or skills that are transferrable to a new job the individual desires. One of the key elements of community engagement is that it is focused on using the time a person spends in the community to build relationships and be involved in activities that maximize their ability to be successful in realizing their future competitive integrated employment goals.

The table below provides information on multiple service delivery systems and programs, including, for example, special education, vocational rehabilitation, Medicaid-funded home and community-based services, workforce development, mental health, and social security, that may be leveraged for needed services and supports for community engagement. Depending on their eligibility for these programs, individuals with disabilities may receive services ranging from assessment, prevocational and occupational skills training, postsecondary education, assistive technology, transportation, job development, work-based learning experiences, among others, that are designed to assist individuals with obtaining competitive integrated employment.

Table 1: Relevant Systems for Community Engagement Support Services

Programs and Services	Vocational Rehabilitation Education / OSERS / RSA	Special Education Education / OSERS / OSEP	Career and Technical Education Education / OCTAE	Medicaid-funded Home and Community Based Services (HCBS)	Workforce Development Labor / ETA	Mental Health HHS / SAMHSA	Medicaid / Social Security / IRS
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vocational, rehabilitation technology, and other career-related assessments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age-appropriate transition assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical skill and other career-related assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual assessment of home health and personal care service needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills assessment 		
Person-centered Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) Individualized vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, including transition services, as well as VR counseling and guidance, and other information to ensure informed choice throughout the VR process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individualized Education Program (IEP) Transition Planning 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case management Person-centered Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual Employment Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person-Centered Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Security Administration (SSA) — Ticket to Work — Employment Network Individualized Work Plan (IWP) and Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) benefits counseling

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<p>Pre-Vocational Services</p> <p>Volunteer/ Apprenticeships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities (i.e., work-based learning experiences, job exploration counseling, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy) • Individualized services for eligible individuals with an IPE (e.g., Apprenticeships, internships and job-related VR services, including job search and placement assistance, job retention services, follow-up services and follow-along services) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic and functional skills (e.g., reading, writing, numeracy, self-determination, independent living etc.); • Mentoring; • Apprenticeships; • Volunteering; and • Community Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career guidance and academic counseling • Career exploration and career development activities • Work-based learning opportunities, including internships and apprenticeships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevocational Services • Habilitation services may support volunteering and community service activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprenticeships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clubhouses and other psychiatric rehabilitation programs • Peer Support Organizations 	
<p>Supported Employment Services and Customized Employment Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported employment services for individuals with most significant disabilities, including youth with most significant disabilities, and customized employment, under an IPE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-Based Transition Programs (CBTP) • Employment 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported Employment and Customized Employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customized Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported Employment (as determined by each state) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ticket to Work Program Employment Networks and Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

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Occupational / Skills Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vocational and other training services, including personal and vocational adjustment training and advanced training in fields such as, but not limited to, science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), under an IPE 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career and technical education at the secondary and postsecondary levels 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental Health Clinics Peer specialist training Counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VR services, including pre-employment transition services, such as volunteer experiences, after-school and summer work experiences, and independent living skills training activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Athletics School Clubs After School Activities 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Companion Services Habilitation Services Personal Care Assistance 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer Support Healthy Transition Grant program Assertive Community Treatment Early serious mental illness programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment Networks assist individuals with achieving competitive, integrated employment, including supported or customized employment. /A
Postsecondary Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through an IPE, individuals with disabilities may receive financial support for postsecondary education institutions (e.g., junior or community colleges, universities, colleges, technical institutes and hospital schools of nursing) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Postsecondary career and technical education programs provided by eligible public or nonprofit private institutions of higher education, such as a community colleges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Services and Supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported Education 	
Financial Literacy Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplace readiness training under pre-employment transition services includes financial literacy training for students with disabilities who are potentially eligible or eligible for VR services. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial literacy services may be provided as part of a career guidance and academic counseling program. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial Literacy skills training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A Psychiatric Rehabilitation programs Peer support programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work Incentives Planning and Assistance/ Benefits Planning

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Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transportation in support of and in connection with the provision of any VR service under an IPE. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support to reduce or eliminate out-of-pocket expenses for special populations (including individuals with disabilities) participating in career and technical education, and supporting the costs associated with fees, transportation, child care, or mobility challenges for those special populations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transportation for work and community participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Assistive Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitation Technology includes rehabilitation engineering, assistive technology devices, and assistive technology services, under an IPE. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistive Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A

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Age Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For receipt of pre-employment transition services, Students with disabilities (ages 16-21), unless a State has elected to provide pre-employment transition services at an earlier age, or older, if a State has a higher maximum age for transition services under IDEA; • For receipt of supported employment services, Youth with disabilities (ages 14–24) and adults with the most significant disabilities; and • for receipt of any VR services except pre-employment transition services, any age so long as the individual with a disability needs VR services to achieve an employment outcome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth – 21 (may go to age 25 in some states) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs and services may not be provided below the middle grades (as defined by state law). There is no maximum age limit on eligibility for participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HCBS may be available to all children and adults throughout the lifespan. The federal government sets minimum income and other eligibility criteria for Medicaid, but states can opt, within certain limits, to go beyond those federal minimums. Most HCBS are optional for states to cover but all states cover at least some optional HCBS for at least some populations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth (up to age 24) and Adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and Adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ticket to Work eligibility is for SSA disabled beneficiaries ages 18 to 64.

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<p>Resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies administer the State VR Services and State Supported Employment Services in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and four Territories • The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management VRTAC-QM • Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) • American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center (AIVRTTAC) • National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (co-funded by RSA and OSEP). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perkins Collaborative Resource Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Employment TA Center • UMass Institute for Community Inclusion • Medicaid Buy-In Q&A • ACL Employment Resources • ADA National Network — directory of regional offices that provide technical assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Center on Leadership for Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming Lives Through Supported Employment • Healthy Transition Grant Program • Employment Supports and Benefits Planning • Early Serious Mental Illness Treatment Locator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Employment Support resources from SSA's Ticket to Work Program from Employment Networks and Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies https://choosework.ssa.gov/ • Social Security Online — The Red Book — A Guide to Work Incentives (ssa.gov) • Work Incentives Planning and Assistance/ • Benefits Planning (WIPA) • Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS) • Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS) • The Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act of 2014

VIGNETTES DEMONSTRATING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Beth, a 22-year-old woman with a significant physical disability and a seizure disorder, was spending her days in a licensed day program. During her individual planning meeting, Beth and her team explored subjects that interest her and activities she likes to do. The team discovered that Beth likes dogs and often walks the family dog with her father. Beth and her community-based services agency created a plan to offer a dog walking service in the neighborhood, including pricing out her services. The community support staff help her schedule the week and accompany her on the walks. As word spread and Beth's dog walking service grew, the staff assisted Beth to visit a local bank branch to open a savings and checking account. Staff also helped Beth to open an Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) account² and begin to make regular contributions from income she receives from her dog walking service. In addition, the day program started a peer support group of part-time workers. They talk about their work, what they plan to do with their money, and their plans for the future. Several friends from the program became dog walkers for Beth's business, with Beth's support staff assisting with the scheduling. Beth's social relationships grew through her dog walking business and gave her a new sense of confidence and purpose.

Tim, an 18-year-old student with autism, wanted to work after graduating from high school. Tim's individualized education program (IEP) Team, including a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor, identified work-based learning experiences for Tim in the community, such as at a local grocery store loading purchases into cars and assisting with delivering meals through the Meals on Wheels program. These experiences met Tim's interests of helping others and being on the move. A daughter of a Meals on Wheels client observed Tim's reliability and asked if he would be interested in assisting to transport patients at the local hospital where she worked. Tim was enthusiastic and soon started working part-time at the hospital two afternoons per week while in school with the support of a job coach. The IEP Team invited the local adult HCBS system representative to his IEP meetings, and they jointly planned for his post-school transition at age 21. Tim worked with the support of his job coach and received benefits counseling provided by his Vocational Rehabilitation agency until graduation when he was promoted to a full-time employee with benefits with the ongoing support of a job coach from the adult social services system.

Harry was 35 years old and had worked in a segregated work center his entire adult life where he packaged pipe fittings all day. Harry wanted to earn more. While assisting Harry to find a job that would meet his goal, the work center staff engaged him in the community, including transporting him to classes at a fitness center. This activity improved Harry's self-confidence. To increase his independence, the center staff provided Harry with the training needed to take the bus to and from the work center and the fitness center. The bus driver noticed Harry and suggested to center staff they assist Harry to explore a job with the bus company. As a result, Harry started work three days per week maintaining buses at the

² For information about ABLE accounts, tax-advantaged saving accounts that can fund disability expenses, visit the [ABLE National Resource Center](#).

company's depot. Because of the skills he learned and the interpersonal connections he made traveling to his fitness classes, Harry expanded his opportunity for competitive integrated employment.

In summary, community engagement is a critically important pathway to competitive integrated employment, and, in order to build capacity to expand these opportunities, policymakers and service providers should coordinate planning and service provision through a framework that incorporates the following principles: 1) Policymakers should focus on aligning policy, practice, funding, and performance measures, to the extent consistent with applicable laws, to encourage and incentivize service providers to provide the community engagement activities and other services necessary for individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment. 2) Service providers should focus on building capacity to offer customized employment and other services that create a person-centered approach to community engagement and competitive integrated employment, as well as developing relationships with employers in the community who may help connect qualified workers with job opportunities that match their skills and interests.

Federal and State policies and funding structures were often enacted based on the outdated and erroneous assumption that some individuals with disabilities are incapable of working. As evidence and progress continue to demonstrate that, with the appropriate supports and accommodations, anyone is capable of being successful in competitive integrated employment, including those with significant disabilities, it is incumbent upon policymakers and service providers to remove these existing systemic barriers and implement new policies and practices that can maximize the potential of all individuals with disabilities to have equal access to competitive integrated employment opportunities in their community.

For additional information, please find several resources on state policy development, rate restructuring, and provider transformation available on the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) website at: [Competitive Integrated Employment \(CIE\) | U.S. Department of Labor \(dol.gov\)](#)