

ISSUE BRIEF

Employment and Economic Self-Sufficiency for People with IDD

December 2015

After decades of individual employment supports, it is known that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) want to work and can work in the general workforce. It is also known that employment is an avenue to full physical, social, and economic access to the community for people with IDD. There are clear opportunities for research that will impact policy and practice in the next decade, particularly research that will result in an improved understanding of effective public service systems to advance change, the development of new interventions and effective scale-up, a better understanding about what leads people with IDD to choose employment, a more effective harnessing of social capital, the development and use of common employment measures and data collection processes in government, improvements in community-level business engagement strategies, and the development of a longitudinal data system following people with IDD.

► Introduction

This brief describes the research goals identified by the invited participants of a strand charged with addressing employment and economic self-sufficiency for people with IDD at the *National Goals Conference* in Washington, DC on August 6-7, 2015.

There have been many advances in employment supports for people with IDD. Yet, today only 15% of people receiving services from state IDD agencies work in integrated employment, including both individual and group supported employment. Only 10% of those individuals worked in individual competitive or supported jobs (Bradley, Bershadsky, Giordano, Hiersteiner, Kennedy-Lizotte, & Butterworth, 2015; Butterworth et al, 2015). Today's systems are shifting in response.

► Need for Research

Policy, system change initiatives, and legal challenges aim to more effectively facilitate individual employment outcomes and embrace employment as a priority for people with IDD. However, research is necessary to develop and monitor activities designed to advance and improve employment and economic self-sufficiency of people with IDD.

► Facilitation Research Goal

Research to understand and improve the effectiveness of public service systems to facilitate employment is crucial to advance system changes that most effectively bolster employment and decrease reliance on public benefits. As more attention is placed on public service systems and effort is put into systems change, there is much to learn to ensure investments of money, personnel, and time are being spent to achieve quality employment outcomes.

► Implementation Research Goal

To improve employment supports and interventions, it is necessary to research new and innovative practices, strategies, tools, and technologies; and to develop evidence-based strategies for operationalizing implementation and scale-up of interventions. A broad view of intervention, implementation, and scale-up strategies is crucial for success: rather than

identifying the need of a single type of intervention—such as support models or technology—a broader perspective is necessary to assure that people with IDD will be employed. There is a need for a greater understanding about how to best develop and expand quality business engagement strategies, and how to build and scale-up community-level business engagement strategies that lead to successful career tracks for people with IDD.

► Public Policy Research Goals

Research on effective strategies, policies, and environmental

IMPACT

At 53 years old, Thomas has held many jobs in various settings. When he was young he worked in a sheltered workshop, where he stuffed marketing envelopes for 20 cents an hour. During this early time in his work life, he would regularly complain that he wasn't happy and he wanted a real job. With new policies and practices, his opportunities grew.

Thomas was one of the first people in his state to get supported employment services in the 1980s. Since then, despite an occasional setback, he has been able to work in the general labor force, earn a competitive wage, pay his bills, and live the life he chooses.

Today, when Thomas is asked what he wants his work future to look like, he responds clearly and quickly. "I want to work fulltime at my job and get off of Social Security." Through effective policies that bolster employment and the advances of strengths-based support practices, this once unfathomable goal for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) is a real possibility.

conditions are important to assure that people with IDD can and will choose and plan careers that foster their economic advancement and community membership across the lifespan. We know that many people with IDD opt out of the general labor market and choose restrictive services. By broadening our understanding about why people with IDD opt into or out of the general labor force, policies can be developed to more effectively facilitate a life in the community and in the regular workforce.

► Social Capital Research Goals

To facilitate employment and career advancement that leads to economic self-sufficiency for people with IDD, research is necessary to identify the most effective ways to enhance social capital to build effective support networks. Social capital is known to facilitate employment success for the general population, and there is growing recognition that social capital is an important ingredient for people with IDD as well. However, it is a resource that cannot be provided or replicated by a service system. Developing new strategies to cultivate, expand, and leverage social capital for people with IDD is important to achieve employment outcomes.

► Quality Research Goals

A major limitation to what is known about the employment and the economic status of people with IDD is the inconsistent, incongruent, and at times, nonexistent data available about this population across all federal agencies. No national longitudinal data collection system about people with IDD exists, nor are there consistent IDD-related measures and data collection processes across federal agencies, programs, and surveys. To inform policy makers, federal survey, employment, and economic assistance programs should collect employment-related and other life-experience information about people with IDD over the lifespan.

► Conclusion

The above research goals will help us better understand what makes public service systems effective and how best to deploy employment systems change. Achieving these goals will provide a mix of new knowledge about the relationship between employment and other individual, system, and community factors; a suite of interventions that span practices; a greater capacity to scale-up effective strategies within and outside of formal systems; and focused strategies to improve system performance.

► References

- Bradley, V., Bershadsky, J., Giordano, S., Hiersteiner, D., Kennedy-Lizotte, R., & Butterworth, J. (2015). Employing people with developmental disabilities: Current status and emerging best practices. In *Way leads on to way: Paths to employment for people with intellectual disability* (pp. 3-33). Washington, DC: American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.
- Butterworth, J., Hiersteiner, D., Engler, J., Bershadsky, J., & Bradley, V. (2015). National Core Indicators: Data on the current state of employment of adults with IDD and suggestions for policy development. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 42(3), 209-220.

► Acknowledgements

Brief author Derek Nord, PhD, University of Minnesota, gratefully acknowledges the members of the Employment and Economic Self-Sufficiency strand for their contributions to the work of the *National Goals* conference, this policy brief, and other supplemental materials.

This material was created with support, in part, by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities; the Association of University Centers on Disabilities; The Arc of the US, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research; the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Massachusetts Boston (Grant #90RT5028); the Research and Training Center on Community Living and Employment at the University of Minnesota (Grant #90RTT5019); and the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Developmental Disabilities and Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Grant #90RT5020).

The views and opinions expressed in this document were generated by independent teams at the *National Goals* Conference held August 6–7, 2015 in Washington, DC. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any of the planning partners or the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research—endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.