

# Accessing employment supports in the adult system for transitioning youth with autism spectrum disorders

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**Abstract.** Effective transition from school to the adult community and employment for youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) requires knowledge of an array of state and community agencies and organizations. This paper provided an overview of current research on employment outcomes for persons with ASD, with emphasis on employment outcomes achieved through participation in services provided by State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies. Descriptions are given for the primary providers of employment and related supports in the adult service system for transitioning youth with ASD. Two case study examples are provided detailing the development and implementation of employment plans responsive to the unique needs and abilities of young adults with ASD. Becoming well informed about resources at the community and state level and learning how to network effectively among these resources are emphasized as key to planning and implementing an effective transition program for a youth with ASD.

**Keywords:** Autism, transition to work, ASD, employment

## 1. Introduction

Effective transition from school to the adult community and employment for youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) requires knowledge of an array of state and community agencies and organizations. As students with ASD explore and plan for employment after high school, they need to develop an understanding of the services potentially available to them in the community, as well as the challenges faced frequently in accessing these services. This paper focuses on the importance of becoming well informed and learning how to network with key community agencies and organizations that are potential resources for employment and related services for youth with ASD transitioning from secondary level education programs to the adult service system.

The move from the public education system to the adult service system during the transition process involves learning a new set of community resources, each with individual and unique rules, regulations, eligibility guidelines, and procedures. For those individuals interested in successfully entering competitive employment as a transition outcome, there are a variety of opportunities and potential challenges in working with the adult service system [27]. In the public education system, special education services are an entitled service for eligible individuals, with local education authorities usually serving as the single agency that coordinates educational services. This single point of service coordination does not exist in adult services [1].

Students with ASD, once they reach age 22 or have completed their secondary level program, no longer have legal right to the variety of services covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 2004 [14]. For the most part, services in the adult system are not entitlement-based. Instead, most post secondary employment and related service agen-

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cies have their own individual eligibility systems that must be met prior to acceptance into an individual program. Different laws and policies govern each of these programs. Families of individuals with ASD report that identifying, accessing, and paying for needed adult-oriented services involves working through a complex public and private service system [1]. Transition from school to adult services can be a most difficult process for youth with ASD and their families in key life areas such as education, community living, community integration, as well as employment [11]. The complexity of finding effective employment supports for transition age youth with disabilities, particularly youth with ASD, can be seen in the unemployment rates within the disability community.

As a group, working age individuals with disabilities, particularly significant disabilities, face substantial challenges in accessing employment. The unemployment rate for working age individuals with disabilities is approximately 70%, with about two thirds of individuals with disabilities who are not working reporting that they are interested in becoming employed [18, 19]. There is clear evidence that transitioning youth with ASD are having particular difficulty accessing services in the adult system needed for them to transition successfully into employment. Individuals with ASD are among the group of persons with a disability most likely to be unemployed [9], with only 15 percent of working age individuals with ASD being employed [7]. Youth with ASD were found to be less likely to be employed than other youth with disabilities, and the employed youth with ASD worked fewer hours than employed youth with other disabilities [24].

There is evidence that individuals with ASD can be successful in employment. For example, nine transition age youth and young adults (mean age of 22) with ASD were followed through a two year program that provided job preparation, job placement, and post employment job coaching over a two year period. Seven of the nine participants retained their initial job placement through the 2 year period [12]. A report on an eight year follow up of a specialized supported employment service for high ability adults with autism or Asperger syndrome noted that 68% of the participants found employment [13]. There is also evidence that practices such as customized employment hold promise for more prescriptive job outcomes, including self-employment for persons with the most significant disabilities, including those with ASD [6].

Historically, services for persons with ASD through the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) System in the

United States have been limited. For example in FY 2005, of the youth with ASD who were out of school for one year or more, only one in five reported receiving services from a State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency [9]. However, there are also reports that the VR system nationally is serving an increasing number of persons with ASD. Cimera and Cowan [8] reported that approximately 1435 persons with a primary disability of ASD achieved an employment outcome in Fiscal Year 2006 after receiving VR services, a 121% increase from the comparative number in FY 2002. They also reported that while VR participants with autism were employed at a higher rate than VR participants in most other disability groups, they also tended to work far fewer hours and earn less in wages per week. Another report [16] noted that successful employment outcomes for VR participants with autism were highly associated with the receipt of on-the-job supports such as provided through supported employment services.

This progression in VR agency response to persons with ASD is indicated in the data presented in Tables 1 and 2<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 compares the successful closure rates<sup>2</sup> for persons with a primary disability of autism and those with a primary disability other than autism. This comparison covers a five year period from FY 2003 to FY 2007. The successful closure rate for persons with autism exceeded the same rate for person with a primary disability other than autism each year. Also, the successful closure rate for persons with autism increased from 61.3% in FY 2003 to 63.7% in FY 2007. The number of persons with autism closed in employment by VR agencies increased from approximately 720 in FY 2003 to 1774 in FY 2007. It is important to note that it is not possible to determine from this data the nature of the ASD experienced by this population.

Table 2 is a comparison of closure rates for persons who submit an application to VR but for whom a determination of VR eligibility is not made. The closure rates for persons with a primary disability other than

<sup>1</sup>Data contained in Tables 1 and 2 and the related discussion was provided through the [www.StateData.info](http://www.StateData.info) resource at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), University of Massachusetts, Boston. The original data source is the RSA-911 Report from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, U.S. Department of Education. Presentations upon which these Tables were developed were prepared by Frank A. Smith at ICI. The authors are most grateful for his assistance.

<sup>2</sup>“Successful closure rate” is based on a comparison of persons closed after an employment outcome and those closed without an employment outcome for the population for whom the services contained in a VR Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) have been initiated.

Table 1  
Comparison of successful closure rates

Fiscal year	Successful closure rate for persons with primary disability of autism	Successful closure rate for persons with a primary disability other than autism
2003	61.3%	58.4%
2004	60.8%	55.4%
2005	62.0%	58.0%
2006	62.9%	58.4%
2007	63.7%	59.6%

Table 2  
Comparison of closure rates after VR application and prior to eligibility determination

Fiscal year	Closure rates: VR applicant before determination of eligibility for persons with primary disability of autism	Closure rates: VR applicant before determination of eligibility for persons with primary disability other than autism
2003	6.5%	18.2%
2004	5.2%	17.2%
2005	5.2%	16.9%
2006	5.6%	16.4%
2007	5.1%	15.7%

autism are consistently approximately 3X higher than the rates for those with a primary disability of autism. For example, this closure rate is 5.1% in FY 2007 for persons with a primary disability of autism, compared 15.7% for persons in other disability areas. This is an encouraging statistic in terms of movement through the VR assessment and eligibility case management steps towards development of an Individual Plan for Employment for persons with autism. The number of persons with autism served by VR agencies does remain limited, but there are signs that VR response to persons in this disability grouping is increasing.

## 2. Overview of employment services and supports in the adult system

The high rate of unemployment among youth and adults with ASD point out clearly that transition age students with ASD and their family members must develop a strong understanding of the community programs that are potential sources of employment and related supports. There is not a specific program or agency that serves persons with ASD in the adult service system. Transitioning youth with disabilities and their families have the potential to receive services and support from a variety of public and private programs. The exact mix

of programs will vary depending upon the needs of each student and his/her transition goals, the nature of the individual's disability, the economic resources of the community, and the eligibility requirements among the various potential community resources [29]. Example community organizations that are important transition resources include the State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs, community rehabilitation service providers (CRPs), One Stop Career Centers, State and Community level Developmental Disabilities Programs, and Work Incentives Planning Assistance Projects (WIPA) for benefits planning for Social Security Disability benefits recipients. A brief description of each is provided in Table 3.

Each of these community agencies provides a unique set of services and supports to students with disabilities as they plan for and seek out employment in

Table 3  
Community service programs in adult system

Community service program	Potential services for youth in transition program
State Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VR)	Primary nationally available employment service support for individuals with disabilities. For eligible individuals, VR agencies provide vocational assessments leading to development of an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE). Variety of employment-related services can be provided under an IPE, including training, counseling, job placement, and supported employment.
Community Rehabilitation Programs/Employment Service Organizations	Community programs that work with State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies and other case management agencies, frequently on a fee-for-service basis, to provide employment assessments, job placement & follow-up services.
State and Local Developmental Disabilities Agencies/Community Service Boards	Provide case management services and assistance for counseling, family planning, nutrition, health care and transportation. Frequently point of access for funding through Home and Community Based Medicaid Waiver programs. Eligibility guidelines vary from state to state for persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders.
One Stop Career Centers	One Stop Centers operated under the authority of the Federal Department of Labor. Local centers assist with career and vocational counseling, occupational training, and job placement and follow along.
Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Projects (WIPA)	Provides financial analysis and information on work incentives and disability benefit programs operated under the Social Security Administration.

the community. Many have entrance eligibility and prerequisite criterion necessary to gain acceptance to their programs and services. There are potentially many other local resources that could be accessed in a particular locality. For example, universities and community colleges can serve as resources by providing information and referral assistance through their resource and support centers for students with disabilities. These offices at most colleges and universities can assist with arranging potential accommodations, identifying potential benefit opportunities, and linking students to internship and job opportunities. It is important to involve these community agencies early in the process so that the transitioning youth, his/her family, and the entire transition team can learn and become familiar with the resources that are available from the specific agencies [26]. Without continual involvement, planning and collaboration with key community agencies, the potential for a successful transition from secondary education to the community will be greatly diminished for students with ASD seeking smooth transitions to adult services that achieve student-driven outcomes, including employment.

Youth with ASD in the transition process from school to the community have potential access to a variety of community training, employment, and support programs. These programs offer an array of case management assistance, employment services, and funding possibilities. However, these programs operate under a wide assortment of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, policies, and service arrangements. The key to a successful transition outcome is early involvement with these programs during the planning process. The critical first step is becoming fully educated regarding the resources and service relationships that characterize community training, employment, and support programs specific to the youth in transition. Next, identify the primary community agencies and work to incorporate these programs into the transition plan. Identify the primary case management/service coordination resource among the community agencies. This role might be taken on by different agencies for different youth in transition depending on the nature of their disability, core service needs, and/or local eligibility requirements. Early transition planning can help to establish these key relationships with community agencies and establish the primary and secondary level participation needed by each to support a successful employment outcome.

### **3. Description of primary employment and related services in the adult system for transitioning students with ASD**

The range of services provided by community agencies and organizations requires a general understanding of the purpose of each agency, realizing that each operate under different program goals, eligibility criteria, service guidelines, and funding requirements. It is most helpful if youth with ASD in transition and their families understand the basic role and function of each agency in the areas of service planning and coordination, service provision, and funding. The following is a detailed description of key community organizations and programs that are potential sources of employment and related supports in the adult service system for youth with ASD.

#### *3.1. State Vocational Rehabilitation services (VR)*

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended most recently in 1998, provide states federal grants to operate comprehensive programs of vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities (Public Law 105-202). VR is a cooperative program between state and federal governments that exists in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories. VR should be a core transition resource for many youth with ASD throughout the transition process. As noted earlier, VR services to persons with a primary disability of ASD have trended upward in recent years. VR agencies can provide an array of services and supports focusing specifically on achievement of an employment outcome including, but not limited to, the following:

- Assessment for determining eligibility for VR services;
- Vocational counseling, guidance, and referral services;
- Vocational and other training, including on the job training;
- Personal assistance services, including training in managing and directing a personal assistant;
- Rehabilitation technology services; and
- Job placement services and supported employment services.

A VR agency directly provides services such as counseling and guidance and job placement assistance, and it will usually arrange with other community providers to acquire services such as rehabilitation technology and supported employment. The ability of a VR agency to

reach out into the community for individualized services is one of its key potential strengths. VR agencies are well positioned to serve as the service coordination hub for employment oriented community services for eligible youth with ASD transitioning from secondary level programs.

Before any VR services can be accessed, an application for services must be completed. This application is reviewed and approved (or denied) by a VR counselor. Qualification for VR services is based on the following eligibility criteria: (1) the presence of a disability that is an impairment to employment and (2) the expectation that the provision of vocational rehabilitation services will result in the individual achieving an employment outcome.

Once eligibility for vocational rehabilitation is determined, an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) is developed by the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor. The IPE identifies both the employment goal chosen by the youth with a disability and the services needed to achieve that goal. The IPE should be developed in close cooperation with the youth with a disability, as well as that individual's family and transition team. The IPE can serve as a roadmap for transition into employment in connection with the completion of high school.

Vocational Rehabilitation counselors can be a helpful resource for teachers and for transitioning youth with disabilities and their families in planning and implementing the transition plan. VR counselors provide case management and service coordination and often have extensive connections with other community agencies and employers. Case management through vocational rehabilitation continues until case closure occurs. Case closure can occur after a minimum of 90 days of employment in a job consistent with the employment objective established in the IPE. Case closure can also occur if the individual is not making progress towards achieving an employment outcome.

Because of limited opportunities many youth with ASD have for work experience as a part of their secondary level education, and also because of the employment challenges presented by ASD, many youth with ASD would benefit from a more extended period of support and training to become acclimated to the demands and expectations of the competitive job site. The importance of an extended period of assessment and training is noted clearly in the case study examples presented later in this paper. For these individuals, the case closure provisions of the Vocational Rehabilitation system can sometimes work against their employment support needs by limiting the period of

time after employment where Vocational Rehabilitation will participate in providing services.

Vocational Rehabilitation counselors also have access to case service funds that can be used to purchase services from authorized vendors. If the service supports the employment goal established in the Individual Plan for Employment and the individual is financially eligible for VR services, VR funds can be used to purchase services such as post secondary education and training, supported employment, transportation, tools and uniforms, and a variety of other services. VR counselors are also usually very familiar with other funding sources that can be used to complement VR funding.

VR counselors can also serve as an information resource about community services for transition teams during the earlier planning stages in the transition process. This information and referral resource would be of value to younger students in the 15–16 age range. Some youth considered higher functioning, for example those with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, may not meet the eligibility requirements for VR services, since VR is required by law to place a priority on those individuals with the most significant disabilities (Public Law 105-202). As noted earlier, determination of eligibility for Vocational Rehabilitation services is done by the VR counselor. Even if a youth with a disability is not found eligible for VR services, the counselor can still be a source of information and referrals, either informally as a part of school based transition resource team, or formally through meeting with the student and his/her family.

As a youth with ASD nears completion of his or her secondary education program, the VR counselor can become actively involved with that individual so that an IPE could potentially be in place as the student prepares to exit the school program. IPEs are frequently done during the final year of a student's secondary program to assure the Vocational Rehabilitation services are in place at the time of completion of the secondary level education program.

Students with autism are candidates for potential development of an IPE as a component of a formal transition plan. The disabling condition related to autism could potentially meet the requirements for eligibility for VR services based as a significant or most significant disability. However, as cited earlier, the number of individuals with ASD who receive services from Vocational Rehabilitation services, though increasing, remains limited. Many youth with disability profiles related to ASD are not being served by VR agencies at present. These youth and their families might experi-

ence a hesitance on the part of VR to provide services. This hesitance can be related to concerns over the ability of the youth with ASD to achieve an employment outcome based on the employment services available in their community. As more community programs and resources become skilled in providing employment supports for individuals with ASD, the opportunities for youth with ASD through Vocational Rehabilitation should improve.

The community link between Vocational Rehabilitation and any specific individual seeking services is critically important. Although Vocational Rehabilitation agencies work under federally mandated guidelines, there are variations from state to state in how VR eligibility guidelines are interpreted and applied that have a substantial impact on the extent to which VR services are available in a specific state and community for youth with ASD. Each state has a Client Assistance Program (CAP) that is set up to provide information and protection and advocacy services for individuals with disabilities. Youth with ASD and their families who have questions or concerns about the experience they have with a Vocational Rehabilitation Agency should consider utilizing the CAP in their state for information and assistance regarding the VR program. A national Directory of State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies and their associated CAP can be found at <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/sbses/vocrehab.htm> [22].

### 3.2. *Community Rehabilitation Programs*

Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) are usually not-for-profit or for-profit private agencies that assist people with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment. Specific services offered by providers will vary. Many CRPs offer career counseling, assessments, job placement, and supported employment services designed to assist individuals with disabilities to live and work in the community. Since many CRPs obtain much of their funding through contractual arrangements, access to their services can require a funding authorization from an agency such as VR [5].

CRPs will occasionally work cooperatively through contracts with secondary level school systems and offer work experience programs while youth with ASD are in school. CRPs, for the most part, are linked closely to the adult service community for students who are nearing their actual transition into the community because CRPs derive their primary funding from agencies such as VR. CRPs might be referred to as a future potential resource during early transition planning and explo-

ration for younger students. Before selecting a specific CRP, transition teams should utilize key quality indicators to assess the effectiveness of employment services provided to persons with ASD by the available community rehabilitation programs [3].

The employment support staff at CRPs are usually called employment consultants or specialists, job coaches, or another similar title. As a component of an employment plan for an individual, an employment consultant will work, for example, in cooperation with a referring vocational rehabilitation counselor to seek out as needed support services such as benefits counseling assistance, child-care options, mental health services, or other supports needed for an individual being served to be successful in employment.

CRPs can provide a variety of employment related services such as assistance with exploring potential job and career options, job preparation, job development, and job placement services. These services might include practicing job interviews, job seeking skills classes, resume preparation, guided job searches, and negotiations with employers. For example, an employer has a job with multiple job duties. Some of these duties match well to the abilities of the job applicant with a disability; other features of the job responsibilities are a poor match for the applicant. The employment consultant, with the permission of the applicant, might work with the employer to negotiate a customized job carved out of the original job description that is a good match for the individual with a disability [4, 25]. Once the job match is completed, the employment consultant can assist with training at the job site, help the worker with a disability adjust to job demands, and provide on-going support as needed to help maintain the job or potentially assist with job change.

### 3.3. *State developmental disabilities agencies and local community service boards*

Individuals with ASD may also be eligible in some states for services administered through State Developmental Disabilities Administrations (DDA) or local Community Services Boards (CSBs). Maryland is an example of a state administered DDA (<http://www.ddamaryland.org/services.htm>), Virginia is an example of a state utilizing a Community Services Board System (<http://www.dmhmsas.virginia.gov/SVC-CSBs.asp>). Unlike state VR agencies discussed earlier, Community Service Boards/Agencies are not operated under a specific set of federal laws and may operate under a variety of different names including

Intellectual Disabilities, Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, or Substance Abuse Services, any of which may potentially cover some individuals with ASD. A state administered Developmental Disabilities Administration, such as found in Maryland, that includes some individuals with ASD within its eligibility guidelines does offer certain advantages in terms of the potential for reasonably consistent statewide access to services as compared to the wide variations in potential services found in more community administered programs.

For both state administered DDAs and locally administered CSBs, eligibility for services are based on the presence of a disability that meets specific guidelines, and these eligibility criteria can vary considerably from state to state and community to community. Individuals with ASD, their families, and those from the schools supporting the transition effort need to learn early on about the eligibility requirements and service opportunities in their specific state and community. Parent groups, Vocational Rehabilitation, community rehabilitation programs, and other members of the adult service system network are great resources for this. Since there are times that even eligible individuals are placed on a waiting list because of lack of funding [2], early contact in advance of the actual transition point will potentially allow for a youth with ASD to work through the eligibility and waiting list steps in time for services to be available when actually needed.

When available, case managers within the local community services/developmental disabilities program are excellent resources for the transition planning team. Generally, case managers are available to serve as a coordination hub with very specific knowledge of services for the youth as well as for family members. Case managers can attend transition meetings, both as resources for information and referral and also to help plan for specific transition support services needed by an individual, including employment and employment-related services. The knowledge that these case managers bring to the table is more likely to benefit older students (e.g., those closer to graduation), but their inclusion on the team can certainly still benefit younger students as they become aware of the opportunities available in their community.

Case managers might also have access to a variety of funding resources to assist with the acquisition of employment supports and related services. A primary funding source is the Home and Community Based Services Medicaid Waiver (HCBS) [2]. The purpose of these waivers is to provide services for individuals

who would need to live in an institutional setting without these services because of the significant nature of their disability and resulting support needs. For eligible individuals, the Home and Community Based Medicaid Waiver can provide access to supports for community living and employment [28]. The HCBS waiver might be a resource for some individuals with ASD who have more significant support needs. However, it is important to emphasize that Medicaid Waiver applications are made at the state level, and the content of Waiver programs vary considerably from state to state. Each Waiver defines a specific target population and specifies the services that will be available [2]. So it is important for each transition team to understand the Waiver program in their state and determine how it might provide additional support.

### *3.4. One Stop Career Centers*

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 [30] created One Stop Career Centers as a key employment resource in the community. The One Stop Centers have core services that are available to anyone in a community who needs help in locating employment. These core services mainly involve access through self-directed job searches through an information center that contains information on available job openings in the community. For those individuals who meet the criteria for eligibility for more intense service through the One Stop Center, a variety of more individualized services are potentially available including but not limited to access to vocational training and assistance with job placement [23].

Youth and young adults with disabilities are targeted for services through One Stop Centers. Therefore, One Stop Centers can play a significant role in the delivery of transition services as a resource for both youth with disabilities and the school transition team in developing a plan for transition. For those One Stop customers who move beyond the general core services, One Stop Center staff can include Plan Managers and/or Disability Program Navigators who can assist in planning employment related services, including reaching out into the community to help identify and acquire other needed transition services. The One Stop by design frequently serves as a home base for many community partners, such as Vocational Rehabilitation and representatives of Community Rehabilitation Programs referred to earlier in this paper, that co-locate staff within the One Stop setting.

One Stop Centers have job listings identifying available employment opportunities. Information from Interest Inventories can help guide a job search. For individuals who need accommodations to access job information through, for example, computerized job search resources, One Stop workstations are frequently equipped with accessibility kits that accommodate a variety of disabling conditions [10]. One Stops offer job clubs where an individual looking for employment can get the support and information from peers and a group facilitator. Some One Stops have more customized employment resource staff that will represent the job interests of an individual with a disability to a potential employer and help negotiate a job opportunity [23]. Additional employment services of potential value to youth in transition include paid and unpaid work experiences, occupational skills training, job placement, and follow-up services after employment to help with job retention and career development. Funding for employment services through a One Stop Center occurs frequently through the Center's direct links with the other community agencies that fund employment services, such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Community Service Boards/Agencies.

Career awareness and exploration can involve use of the career exploration lab at the One Stop that might include various interest tests and web based links to job information. Exploration can include planned visits to job sites to review different employment opportunities, meetings with employer representatives, and summer job programs. As transition age youth with ASD move towards completion of their school program, exploration can move to more extended internships or part-time employment built into the individual's school program and transition plan. One Stop Centers are an evolving community resource. Youth with ASD, their families, and their transition teams need to become thoroughly familiar with the resources and services available from the One Stop Center in their community early on in the transition process.

### 3.5. *Work incentive planning and assistance programs*

The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 had multiple aspects to the legislation. One of the most successful pieces of this legislation was the creation of Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach (BPAO) projects. These projects were funded through the Social Security Administration to assist recipients and beneficiaries of SSA disability benefits in understanding what would happen to their benefits if

they chose to go to work or increase their employment. These programs connected individuals with disabilities to highly trained individuals who could answer their questions about both cash and medical benefits as well as assist individuals in utilizing work incentives. These projects worked with over 240,000 individuals throughout the course of the funding cycle [15].

In 2006, the BPAO projects were replaced by Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) projects again funded through the Social Security Administration. WIPA projects are located in every U.S. state and territory (<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/work/>). The primary goal of these projects is to assist SSA beneficiaries in being better equipped to make informed choices about work.

WIPA projects are staffed by Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWICs) who have undergone more than 40 hours of training and testing to become qualified to provide work incentives planning and assistance. These CWICs are trained in the SSA disability programs and work incentives as well as federal and state benefit programs, including Medicaid, Medicare, TANF, Food Stamps, HUD housing programs, veterans benefits, etc. CWICs are also capable of referring beneficiaries with disabilities to appropriate Employment Networks or State VR agencies if individuals need assistance with finding employment. WIPA projects are allowed to serve all SSA beneficiaries with disabilities, including transition-to-work aged youth and veterans.

It is not necessary for service providers to become experts on Social Security benefits, but a basic understanding of the programs is extremely helpful. Building and maintaining a connection to the local WIPA program and in turn the CWIC provider is critical to assisting beneficiaries in beginning their path to employment. If unsure of how one's cash and medical benefits will be affected by work, an individual may never take a chance at being gainfully employed [17].

## 4. **Pulling it all together: Examples of employment supports in the adult service system for youth and young adults with ASD<sup>3</sup>**

### 4.1. *David – Cooperative efforts of the school and adult services to develop an employment profile*

David is a 22 year old young man with autism. He recently graduated from a private school that serves pri-

<sup>3</sup>The names of individuals described in these examples have been changed to protect their privacy.



marily students with autism. During his last two years at the school, he participated in their newly formed vocational program. This program was for students 16 to 22 years of age who were interested in participating in community employment. The school worked with David and his family to assess his skills and interests through multiple outings into the community, spending time with David and his family and talking with previous service providers and school personnel.

David is a very outgoing young man. He enjoys interacting with everyone he meets. In talking with his family, the school found out that he had delivered mail at the school he attended previously. His mother reported that he loved this position because of the high level of interaction as well as his high energy level. David does not like to sit still for any length of time. He also is able to perform matching tasks and can learn tasks through repeated demonstration, verbal or visual instruction.

David's teachers conducted a person centered planning meeting and used the PATH process to help him determine next steps in his life [21]. David and his family discussed their desire for him to live independently in a safe environment. They also discussed the importance of work in the community. As one of the next steps for David to reach employment, the school contacted the local Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. With his parents' approval, David submitted an application for VR services.

At the same time, David participated in the school's vocational program where he visited different local businesses learning work tasks. His first internship was at a local animal shelter. At this site, he greeted visitors, walked the dogs, and cleaned the foyer and classroom areas. His next internship was at a grocery store where he learned to stock shelves, break down boxes, gather carts from the parking area, and vacuum the entrance. His last internship for the year was at a community health care facility. In this position, he worked in the kitchen assisting with packaging items, stocking the condiment bar, and cleaning tables.

Midway through David's final year in school, the VR agency found him eligible for services. His counselor met with David and his mother, and they decided that typical or standard assessments would not be the best way to learn his skills and interests. For David, they would have him work with a local community rehabilitation program to perform some extended situational assessments at various work sites. The VR agency typically funds situational assessments for three to four days in a local business, where the individual would spend a few hours each day. The employment specialist would learn in a matter of 16 to 20 hours at two or three

assessments about an individual's skills, abilities and interests. For David, this was clearly not enough time for him to learn about the jobs or for the employment specialist to learn about David. He would need more intensive services.

The community rehabilitation program was allowed to assess David's skills and interests using situational assessments that lasted 30 to 40 days in length and several hours per day. The VR agency has learned that for individuals with ASD, they may need to adjust their services. Using this retooled approach, the employment specialist was able to get a better idea of David's work style, preferred work environments, skills and interests, which would not have been accomplished if the standard assessment approach has been used. The employment specialist is currently using the information gathered during the extended assessments to match David to a job that best utilizes his skills and personality.

#### *4.2. Randy – Living and working in the adult community*

Randy is 27 years old and has autism and Tourette syndrome. He has limited speech and difficulty with articulation. Randy attended a public high school and participated in their special education program. He finished his secondary school five years ago. He participated in several work experiences while in school, some of which were paid. Randy worked in the school cafeteria for 6 months and in the on-campus recycling department for one year. While in school, his mother assisted him in obtaining a competitive job at a local discount store. He worked for 2 years in this position before he was let go following a behavioral incident. After his job ended, his mother tried to find a job for him, but was not successful. Through a friend, she found out that Randy might be eligible for services from the state vocational rehabilitative agency, which she contacted and set up a meeting.

The VR agency representatives met with Randy and his mother, had them fill out initial paperwork, and spent time talking with them to better acquaint themselves with Randy. The application for services was submitted and Randy was found eligible for services. He was then contacted by a DRS counselor to come into the office for a meeting to discuss a plan for employment. The counselor set up an evaluation for Randy to obtain some basic information that would assist them in the job search. This evaluation showed that Randy was able to follow verbal, demonstrated and pictorial directions. However, the instructions needed to be very specific and

repeated each time the task was completed. Randy tried several work tasks including: information processing, mail sorting, food prep, and assembly. He was observed to have a positive work attitude, perseverance, ability to work with others, acceptance of constructive criticism, adjustment to repetitive tasks, and care of equipment and materials. The following negative work behaviors were noted: slow work rate, poor accuracy, an inability to adapt to change, and vocal outbursts (unrelated to his Tourette syndrome). It was recommended that Randy receive training with the goal of supported employment in the area of food service, office worker, or custodian.

The VR agency also obtained medical reports on Randy's physical abilities. These reports showed that he has fair muscle strength and he could walk independently. He is able to lift heavy objects, walk long distances, twist, stoop, and climb. He has some fine motor skills but works better with larger objects and gross motor movements.

Records were also retrieved from the public school that Randy attended. The notes in his record showed that Randy enjoys interacting with other people, is generally very polite, and usually goes along with whatever his teachers or peers asked as long as his general daily schedule is being followed. During his time in school, he was reported to be an excellent worker, very motivated, and completed his assigned duties. Randy was capable of learning how to separate the recycling materials on the school campus; he learned to collect the recycling from each classroom and offices at the school. He was able to work independently with minimal supervision and reinforcement after two months of intensive training. Randy enjoyed working alone and got very frustrated if he was unable to complete a task without assistance. Instead, he would try to figure out a way to do something rather than asking someone for help.

While in school, Randy did exhibit negative behaviors when changes occurred in his regular schedule. He exhibited self injuring behaviors, physical outbursts, and on occasion pushed staff to get them away when he was feeling threatened in given situations. Randy also had a difficult time waiting for activities that he enjoyed and would often act out if he had to wait more than a few seconds for a given item. Randy and his mother expressed to their VR counselor that they were extremely excited and eager for him to start work. His mother was very supportive and hired an assistant utilizing Medicaid Waiver funds who was available to drive Randy to work once employed. Randy lives in an apartment and his Medicaid Waiver funded assistant stays with him all day and night. Randy's mother does not

want him to live his adult life without the interaction and reward that employment will offer.

To assist Randy in obtaining employment, his VR counselor referred him to a local Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP). The counselor believed that given the significance of Randy's disabilities and the high level of support needs, he would benefit from the intense assistance a community rehabilitation program could offer. The CRP had Randy participate in two situational assessments that VR funded: one as a laundry room attendant at a large hotel and the other as a janitor in a grocery store. In both situations, Randy was motivated to perform the job tasks. If the way he was doing it was incorrect, the employment specialist would demonstrate the correct way. Randy was open to instruction but got frustrated at times. Due to his vocal outburst as a result from his Tourette syndrome, he would need an environment that was accommodating. He was able to work for one hour in both situations before requesting a break to get a soda or to go to the bathroom.

To learn more about Randy's interests, the employment specialist took him out in the community. Randy pointed out restaurants he frequents with his mother and the park he goes to with a "big brother". He also pointed to the car radio frequently, requesting for it to be turned up. When asked about his favorite activity, he quickly said Frisbee and sports. On one outing, the employment specialist took him to an outdoor mall and they walked around for a little while. Randy indicated he wanted to eat and picked a fast food restaurant in the food court. His mother later shared with the employment specialist that Randy repeatedly asks to eat at the same location. Based upon the information the employment specialist was able to obtain during these outings with Randy, the team began to look for a position where Randy could excel. A position was found after several months of job developing where Randy could work in a local coffee shop that he frequented with his mother. He would be responsible for prepping different foods needed for their lunch menu. The restaurant was small with very little employee turnover. The set up of the kitchen allowed him to easily move around and find a space to himself so that he did not feel crowded.

Randy's employment specialist worked with him to learn the tasks of the job as well as find tools that would make him more productive. The employment specialist found a glove that Randy could wear when using knives that prevented him from getting cut. As Randy was trained, the employment specialist used picture books to help him remember steps of some of the tasks where he had difficulty.

Randy worked in his position for a year and a half before economic stresses resulted in the closing of the coffee shop. Randy currently has an open case with the VR agency and is again connected to a community rehabilitation program that is assisting him in finding a new position.

### **5. Summary: Keys to successful transition to adult services**

The specific services that might be available to each youth with ASD and his or her family through the local Adult Service System need to be determined for each individual's own state and community. Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders have a wide and varying array of individualized interests and support needs. There are a variety of ways that community agency staff can be involved in the transition planning process for a cross section of youth with ASD. For example, the main contact for the team of a person with immediate employment goals might be from Vocational Rehabilitation; for an individual who has primary community living support needs to be arranged prior to employment considerations, service coordination might come through a case manager at a Developmental Disabilities Community Services Agency; for a person who has post secondary training/education as an immediate goal, the plan manager at a One Stop Career Center might be the hub for transition planning.

It is clear for youth with ASDs and their families that moving from the secondary level education system to the adult services community is truly a mix of opportunities and challenges. The opportunities come from the array of services and resources that are potentially available. Vocational Rehabilitation offers a national network of state agencies and community services that are specifically designed to assist individuals with disabilities achieve and maintain employment outcomes. Community rehabilitation programs can offer more prescriptive localized services that match to local cultures and economies. Community Services Boards/Agencies can mix a variety of community living supports such as case management and supported living with access to funding for employment through, for example, funding accessed through a prescriptive Home and Community Based Medicaid Waiver application. One Stop Career Centers offer a variety of potential resources and services that directly support transition to community living and employment. Timely and effective Work Incentives Planning and Assistance can provide fami-

lies with a confident understanding of the relationship between employment and receipt of disability benefits.

The challenge faced by youth with ASD and their families is that these many resources vary considerably at the state and local level. Some do not exist in certain communities or are bound by limited funding and waiting lists for services. Eligibility requirements vary from state to state and program to program. Limited funding that does not fully meet the need of persons with disabilities, including those with ASD, is a universal and ongoing concern.

To plan and implement an effective transition program for a youth with ASDs, become well informed about resources at the community and state level and learn how to network effectively among these resources. The transition team within the secondary school program can reach out to the key community resources both formally with an invitation for them to join the transition team for specific youth with ASDs and more informally as sources of general information and referral for families. The key to successful transition for a youth with ASDs and his/her family is being well informed early on in the transition process about which of the community resources are of value to that individual and then networking effectively with these resources throughout the transition process.

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