

## **Employment for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities:**

## **Translating Evidence Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **Virtual Symposium**

## July 28, 2021

Contents

[About the Symposium 3](#_Toc81225396)

[Outcomes 3](#_Toc81225397)

[About the ICDR 3](#_Toc81225398)

[Welcome and Introductions 4](#_Toc81225399)

[Panel 1: Vocational Rehabilitation – Evidence and Outcomes 4](#_Toc81225400)

[Q&A and Discussion 6](#_Toc81225401)

[Panel 2: Early Work Experiences and Future Employment 6](#_Toc81225402)

[Q&A and Discussion 8](#_Toc81225403)

[Panel 3: Postsecondary Education and Employment 9](#_Toc81225404)

[Q&A and Discussion 11](#_Toc81225405)

[Panel 4: Federal Efforts to Improve Employment Outcomes 11](#_Toc81225406)

[Q&A and Discussion 13](#_Toc81225407)

[Panel 5: Employers and the Future of Work 13](#_Toc81225408)

[Q&A and Discussion 15](#_Toc81225409)

[Symposium Summary 15](#_Toc81225410)

[Employment 16](#_Toc81225411)

[Education 16](#_Toc81225412)

[Support Services 16](#_Toc81225413)

[Three Takeaways 17](#_Toc81225414)

[Participant Responses 17](#_Toc81225415)

# About the Symposium

The Employment for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities: Translating Evidence Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic Virtual Symposium was conducted by the Interagency Committee on Disability Research (ICDR), with sponsorship and support from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The purpose of the symposium was to examine research evidence and strategies for improving education and employment outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities during the pandemic and beyond.

## Outcomes

* Better understand impacts of COVID-19 on youth with disabilities and their families.
* Gain knowledge of current education and employment research.
* Discuss challenges and strategies to promote resiliency and improved employment outcomes.
* Generate recommendations for future research, policy, and practice.

The slide presentations for this symposium can be accessed by selecting the following link: <https://neweditions.net/meeting/icdr-translating-evidence-agenda>. To download a presentation, select the presentation title.

# About the ICDR

The Interagency Committee on Disability Research (ICDR) was authorized by the amended 1973 Rehabilitation Act to promote coordination and collaboration among federal departments and agencies conducting disability, independent living, and rehabilitation research programs, including programs relating to assistive technology research and research that incorporates principles of universal design.

The ICDR adopted a vision to be widely recognized for facilitating and coordinating federal interagency efforts and for promoting collaborative relationships that maximize the best use of federal resources for disability, independent living, and rehabilitation research. The ICDR has a long history of promoting collaboration and coordination across the government to meet the needs of the disability community and leverage limited resources. In its 2018–2021 Strategic Plan, the ICDR developed the following three goals:

**Goal #1:** Improve interagency coordination and collaboration in four thematic research areas: transition, economics of disability, accessibility, and disparities.

**Goal #2:** Develop a government-wide inventory of disability, independent living, and rehabilitation research.

**Goal #3:** Promote ongoing stakeholder input on gaps and priorities for disability, independent living, and rehabilitation research.

This symposium is part of the ICDR’s work toward Goal #1 to improve interagency coordination and collaboration in the area of transition.

# Welcome and Introductions

Dr. Anjali J. Forber-Pratt, Director of NIDILRR and Chair of the ICDR, opened the meeting and welcomed and thanked everyone for joining. Dr. Forber-Pratt discussed acquiring her disability at a young age and shared her experience with employment early in her life. Existing research shows that people with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than those without disabilities but not because they do not want to work. There are also gender inequalities that exist among people with disabilities; women with disabilities are generally less likely to have a job than their male counterparts. Research also shows that the transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment is particularly challenging for many students with disabilities, and even more so for youth and young adults with autism spectrum disorder. The symposium’s panelists will share their expertise on many of the subjects around transitions and employment, and Dr. Forber-Pratt expressed her excitement for each of the panels.

# Panel 1: Vocational Rehabilitation – Evidence and Outcomes

**Moderator:** *Joseph M. Ashley, Rh.D., Owner and Principal, Ashley Consulting, LLC*

**Wisconsin PROMISE Lessons Learned**

*Emily* *Brinck, Ph.D.*

*Researcher, Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment*

*Wisconsin Center for Education Research*

*School of Education*

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Dr. Emily Brinck gave an overview of the Wisconsin Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project, shared data from the project, and gave recommendations and lessons learned. The Wisconsin PROMISE project looked at connecting high school-aged youth who were receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Half of the students who were enrolled in the program received VR services as usual, and half of the students received the Wisconsin PROMISE services, which included things like employment services, work incentives benefits counseling, financial coaching, social skills training, and family and self-advocacy training.

The research showed that the PROMISE program increased the rate of students having an opportunity to gain paid work experience while in high school. Student who had or utilized Division of Vocational Rehabilitation services had higher employment rates. With that information, researchers recommend that once a youth is referred to Division of Vocational Rehabilitation services, that youth should be engaged with the employment services through things like motivational interviewing to ensure that youth receiving SSI are informed and connected to the services that are available to them.

It was also found that youth who met with a work incentives benefits specialist had twice as many jobs as those who did not, and youth who met with a financial coach had twice the total weekly earnings as those who did not. From this finding, researchers recommend increasing funding to integrate financial coaching and planning and utilizing a coaching model where information about benefits and financial planning can be shared. Researchers also recommend including resources to help support family members and providing information to them on the employment possibilities for youth with disabilities.

**The Employability of African-American and Latino Students with Disabilities Who Have Encountered the Criminal Justice System**

*Glacia* *Ethridge, Ph.D.*

*Associate Professor*

*North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University*

Dr. Glacia Ethridge shared findings from three published research articles focused on African-American and Latino male ex-offenders with disabilities. She also linked them to African-American and Latino youth with disabilities and the impact that the school-to-work prison pipeline has on the employability of this population. The first article focused on how the lack of employability due to criminal history significantly influences recidivism, thus creating low education attainment, limited job skills, and gaps in employment. Regardless of criminal history status, African-Americans and Latinos have fewer job opportunities than their White counterparts with criminal histories. Current VR practices do not fully meet the employability needs of African-American and Latino ex-offenders receiving VR services.

The second article examined existing literature related to disability and criminal history as employment obstacles among African-American and Hispanic/Latino ex-offenders, including the school-to-prison pipeline that exists for students with disabilities. We know that schools suspend students with disabilities and students of color at higher rates than their White counterparts. There has been an increased reliance on police officers to discipline student, meaning that students often find themselves being punished for nonviolent crimes, or if they are more severe, students may be incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system.

Based on the findings in these articles, Dr. Ethridge provided some recommendations. First, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Justice should provide context regarding the 10-day suspension rule. Oftentimes, instead of receiving 10-day suspensions, individuals are automatically expelled and lose a whole year of school. ED should also fund the development of systems for evaluating implicit racial bias and disability bias in schools, including implementing implicit bias training. VR counselors can also be advocates for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students with disabilities seeking VR services, and VR counselors will need to be creative with their approach to pre-employment transition services, especially for those clients who have encountered the juvenile justice system.

**Lessons from the Literature and Future Directions on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities**

*Timothy N. Tansey, Ph.D.*

*Professor, Rehabilitation Counselor Education Program*

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Dr. Timothy Tansey presented a review of literature related to employment of transition-age youth with disabilities with the purpose of understanding what is currently happening at VR agencies, what school systems are doing to support youth in transition, and the approach to providing services. Findings from the literature review showed that paid work is incredibly important. When there is an absence of paid work experience or on-the-job training, there is a significant drop in successful transitions into long-term employment.

Dr. Tansey also touched on the importance of involving the community and the family in the planning of transition services. He offered some solutions for collaboration services associated the employment outcomes, including employment preparation and career readiness services, integration of VR career support personnel, paid internships and employment, offering training for employers, and customized job development, employment, and job coaching.

## Q&A and Discussion

**Q: How do you think VR counselors should approach work incentives, benefits counseling, and financial coaching in terms of changing their approach and the training of VR counselors?**

A: Dr. Brinck mentioned that a concern they heard from many participants was that they would lose their benefits if they started working, so having education, training, and financial coaching will put the families at ease when they better understand how to navigate this transitional phase. For the VR counselor, their approach should focus on the education and explanation of what the family should expect. Dr. Tansey echoed this, saying that focusing on family engagement and discussing how this service will benefit both the student and the family is important.

**Q: Where would you like to see the research continue to go in the field?**

A: Dr. Tansey said that focusing on high-quality research using diverse methodologies, including quasi-experimental and experimental designs, will be critical in moving toward evidence-based practices in the field. Dr. Tansey also noted that it is important to not just focus on the supply-side of this—there needs to be a focus on the environment that individuals are in, including a focus on helping employers provide good environments for individuals to work in. Dr. Brinck added that she would like to see more research around the family advocates, as that was just a pilot in Wisconsin. She would also like to see more research around the collaboration between VR counselors, special education teachers or schools, and businesses.

**Q: What are some recommendations for case management on transitions caseloads?**

A: Dr. Ethridge discussed the need for creativity when it comes to case management. She also recommended that when working with students of color with disabilities, having communication with the family is important. She stressed the importance of serving as an advocate for those students and their individual needs, especially within the school system, where not everyone is trained to work with students with disabilities. She noted as well that the advocacy could also go beyond the school system and include local and state government.

# Panel 2: Early Work Experiences and Future Employment

**Moderator:** *Melissa Diehl, M.A. Ed., C.R.C., Senior Technical Assistance and Research Analyst*, *National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C), The George Washington University*

**Helping Youth with Autism Enter Competitive Employment: Unlocking the Potential**

*Paul Wehman, Ph.D.*

*Professor, School of Education’s Counseling and Special Education*

*Director, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center*

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Dr. Paul Wehman shared his research on the employment of youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There is evidence that youth with ASD experience unemployment and underemployment at higher levels than individuals with other disabilities. With one of the greatest predictors of competitive employment for youth with disabilities being having work experience before exiting high school, this randomized controlled trial partnered with the Bon Secours hospital network to help youth with ASD gain work experience through internships.

This research was not only looking at whether individuals with ASD could successfully get employment and wages, but also whether they could become more independent as a function of work. Based on the support intensity scale that was used, individuals were becoming more independent even after just one year. After expanding this into a NIDILRR-funded Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project that also found similar results, Dr. Wehman is confident this can be established as an evidence-based practice.

For future opportunities, Dr. Wehman prompted the following questions: Why do businesses hire persons with disabilities, or why not? What personnel are the most important in the hiring and retention process—human resources or operations folks? How do we measure behavioral change in business? What interventions work to help low-performing businesses hire and retain individuals with disabilities?

***Moving Ahead with PROMISE: Lessons Learned from Six Model Demonstration Projects Through the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income Project***

*Kelly Nye-Lengerman, Ph.D.*

*Director, Institute on Disability*

*University of New Hampshire*

Dr. Kelly Nye-Lengerman shared some of the lessons learned from the Institute on Disability as the technical assistance (TA) center for six of the model demonstration projects representing a number of states and groups on the PROMISE project. As background, PROMISE was a result of a partnership through ED, the Social Security Administration (SSA), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Labor to address long-term dependence on SSI. The aim of PROMISE was to find new ways of providing support, to build a package around evidence-based practices, and to look at the effectiveness of these interventions. PROMISE used a randomized controlled trial design to study the outcomes for youth and their families who received the PROMISE intervention versus those who received services as usual. The benefits of PROMISE were seen in the overlap of case management, benefits counseling, career and work-based learning and planning, and self-determination.

PROMISE’s core functions included developing partnerships with state agencies and organizations, completing participant outreach and recruitment, providing TA and training, and providing services and supports that included case management, benefits counseling and financial capability services, career and work-based learning experiences, and parent training. The TA center created a lessons-learned report as a result of this work. Dr. Nye-Lengerman shared some of the following key lessons, among others:

1. Shared values and beliefs about the capacity and expectations for youth with disabilities goes a long way in moving state teams, state systems, and individuals and families toward a pathway of employment and postsecondary education.
2. Partnerships are essential to achieving results.
3. Memorandums of Understanding between state agencies and entities that provide the services and supports are useful.
4. Maximizing the capacity of existing services to serve SSI youth and families is important toward the sustainability of improved service delivery.
5. Comprehensive training and TA are necessary in supporting multidisciplinary approaches in serving SSI youth and families.
6. A comprehensive, holistic case management service model is critical in achieving youth and family engagement.
7. When youth are the primary voice in transition planning and decision-making, they are more likely to be committed to future education and employment goals.

**Promoting Entrepreneurship among Low-Income Youth with Disabilities**

*Fabricio E.* *Balcazar, Ph.D.*

*Professor, Department of Disability and Human Development*

*University of Illinois at Chicago*

Dr. Fabricio Balcazar shared research from a Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project called Promoting Entrepreneurship among Low-Income Youth with Disabilities. The purpose of the study is to design, implement, and evaluate a multifaceted intervention that engages youth with disabilities in self-employment and entrepreneurship and offers a real opportunity for young people to explore skills, abilities, interests, and motivations for self-employment and entrepreneurship that may have otherwise been untapped. They are using a participatory research approach to maximize the relevance and usability of the intervention products. This 5-year research project is currently in Year 2.

Findings from the first year show that factors that help facilitate self-employment include access to other entrepreneurs; social supports from family and friends; having motivation to be your own boss, help others, and earn money; having access to funding; qualities such as persistence, creativity, charisma, and hope; being flexible; and having access to opportunities to market and sell their products. Some of primary barriers include lack of money, lack of confidence, lack of social support or discouragement from family members, lack of support or discouragement from VR counselors including lack of training for the VR counselor, and lack of space and transportation.

The researchers are currently in the process of the formative evaluation at two of their sites, and students are going through the curriculum. They are also in the process of recruiting new sites for the future.

## Q&A and Discussion

**Q: What are some suggestions or strategies to help youth gain first-time work experience and employment regarding the increase in minimum wages?**

A: Dr. Wehman noted that they have seen an increase in minimum wage in Virginia and that has not impacted the employment of people with disabilities—both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. Dr. Lengerman wanted to point out the Senate’s Raise the Wage Act of 2021 to ensure that we are supporting and promoting work experiences for individuals with disabilities that are either at or above minimum wage because subminimum wage does exist in many states.

**Q: Why is it important to expose youth with disabilities to entrepreneurship?**

A: Dr. Balcazar shared that they are finding that entrepreneurship is a great option for youth with severe disabilities. They are able to do those things they love, it can remove barriers such as transportation out of the home, and it allows them the capacity to work in a safe environment. It is also important because developing a business plan or starting a business is not something that is offered in high school.

**Q: What are some strategies regarding skill development for getting and receiving feedback for youth?**

A: Dr. Lengerman said that what they have seen through PROMISE was the importance of the individualized approach and building a mutually respectful relationship with youth. They also heard from the field that feedback seemed to be better received when it was coming from the employer or supervisor directly rather than from the job coach or parents. Dr. Wehman agreed with Dr. Lengerman’s comments noting that it was consistent with what they found with the individuals with ASD. He added that these findings were also in line with the idea of the importance of the business feeling that they have control over the situation and can work with the individuals who are placed there. Dr. Balcazar echoed the sentiment of the importance of placing people in the right positions and in the right kind of work.

# Panel 3: Postsecondary Education and Employment

**Moderator:** *Kelli Thuli Crane, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor, Center for Transition and Career Innovation, University of Maryland*

**Employment for Youth with Disabilities: Translating Evidence Amid Crisis Symposium**

*Michelle Mullen, M.S., C.R.C., C.P.R.P.*

*Developer of HYPE (Helping Youth on the Path to Employment)*

*Department of Psychiatry*

*University of Massachusetts Medical School*

Michelle Mullen discussed college students with mental health conditions and the knowledge-to-research-to-practice gaps. She first discussed and encouraged participants to reconsider assumptions about college students with mental health conditions. She said focusing on executive-functioning skills for students with mental health conditions is important because these skills are critical to managing complex and competing demands. Lower cognitive functioning, including executive-functioning skills, is strongly associated with poorer psychosocial, academic, and vocational functioning.

Ms. Mullen discussed the Helping Youth on the Path to Employment (HYPE) project. HYPE is a young adult career development intervention that focuses on prioritizing education early to get a maximum rate of return. HYPE was a community-based mental health initiative that pivoted during COVID-19 because of the serious implications for college students on campus. It was designed to reduce the number of students who fall through the cracks on campus by preventing disruptions and enhancing academic performance.

Ms. Mullen also shared information on identifying and resolving the knowledge-to-research-to-practice gaps. Right now, we do not know the unique barriers for this population to be successful in postsecondary education and later in the primary labor markets. Other gaps include understanding the skills required to be successful and which services and resources are critical to success. We do know that career development, postsecondary education, and work is the normative and typical pathway to avoid poverty and system dependence; that SSI is a strong disincentive to work; and that the best predictor of work is previous work. She encourages investments in postsecondary education, supported education, and career development in order to help those with mental health conditions avoid lifetimes of poverty, social isolation, and under/unemployment.

**Strategies for Improving Educational and Employment Outcomes for Postsecondary Students with Traumatic Brain Injuries**

*Phillip Rumrill, Ph.D., C.R.C.*

*Professor, Department of Early Childhood, Special Education, and Counselor Education*

*University of Kentucky*

Dr. Phillip Rumrill discussed strategies for improving educational and employment opportunities for postsecondary students with traumatic brain injuries (TBI). TBI is a serious public health problem and is the leading cause of death and disability among Americans under age 45. TBI can limit postsecondary educational options, narrow career aspirations and employment opportunities, and reduce community participation.

Project Career was a 6-year inter-professional development project to promote academic success for veteran and civilian college students with TBI. The intervention consisted of a Matching Person and Technology assessment, cognitive support technology through iPads and apps, and individualized vocational case management services. There were encouraging rates of paid employment (84 percent) and productive, meaningful post-graduation activity (100 percent). At 6- and 12-month follow-ups, students reported significant gains in career optimism, career decidedness, social capital, and quality of life.

**Employment Challenges and Opportunities post COVID**

*John Butterworth, Ph.D.*

*Senior Research Fellow*

*Director, Employment Systems Change and Evaluation*

*Institute for Community Inclusion*

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Dr. John Butterworth shared a macro view of the impact that the pandemic has had on people with disabilities in the labor market. People with intellectual or developmental disabilities were more affected by the pandemic than people with other disabilities. Much of this is because of the programmatic approach to providing services.

Through talking to individuals and conducting structured interviews with employment consultants and other employment support professionals about how they adapted to the pandemic circumstances, researchers found that there is a need to rethink the ways supports are provided and what is needed to support individuals. Dr. Butterworth notes that the pandemic showed that a program-based model is not sufficiently person-centered or sufficiently resilient to help people achieve outcomes like employment or to fully engage in the community. Researchers found that flexibility, individualization, connections through technology, and virtual and remote supports were all benefits of pivots made due to the pandemic. These findings on the ways that supports are provided to benefit individuals with disabilities should be kept in mind moving forward.

## Q&A and Discussion

**Q: What role do career counselors and other career-focused staff play in outcomes research?**

A: Dr. Butterworth pointed out that career counselors are a key part of the employment pathway. The messaging that individuals receive is important to the direction they take and the expectations they have for themselves. Career counselors should also address the concerns from individuals and their families and reframe things in a solutions-based way. Ms. Mullen agreed and underscored the importance of language and messaging to youth to help them set expectations for themselves that are not contained by social security. Dr. Rumrill also added that Project Career focused on getting participants work experience and career development while they were in school so they had that necessary experience and were not at a competitive disadvantage compared to other students once they graduated.

**Q: What does the rebound from the pandemic for postsecondary education programs or service providers look like? What are some strategies or practices that will continue moving forward?**

A: Dr. Butterworth said there is a need to move to a more individualized approach to providing services that is not based on a building or a place. While things are often talked about as being person-centered, that is not always how they are organized. Being successful moving forward may mean rethinking the most basic ways that supports are offered. Ms. Mullen agreed that COVID-19 proved there can be a lot of flexibility in how services and supports are offered. Dr. Rumrill also echoed the positive impact of flexibility, especially when it comes to technology infrastructure.

# Panel 4: Federal Efforts to Improve Employment Outcomes

**Moderator:** *Purvi Sevak, Ph.D., Principal Researcher, Mathematica*

**Federal Efforts to Improve Employment Outcomes**

*Joyanne Cobb*

*Acting Director, Office of Research and Demonstration*

*Office of Research, Demonstration, and Employment Support*

*Social Security Administration*

Joyanne Cobb shared some of the SSA’s efforts regarding youth with disabilities, specifically within the Office of Research, Demonstration, and Employment Support (ORDES). ORDES supports the employment of SSI and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries by administering various employment programs like the Ticket to Work Program and by overseeing the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance program contracts. Ms. Cobb shared information on the Youth Transition Demonstration, which tested interventions and waivers, as well as some of the findings from PROMISE programs.

Recently, SSA held a State of the Science virtual meeting that was dedicated to discussing lessons learned from past tests of policies and programs to improve beneficiary work outcomes and directions for future research. The slides and recording are available online. She also shared the Youth Toolkit 2021 resource, which includes a number of resources and information for transition-age youth. Another publication resource, *What You Need to Know About Your Supplemental Security Income (SSI) When You Turn 18*, is updated annually.

**Office of Disability Employment Policy: Federal Efforts to Improve Employment Outcomes**

*Robert Trombley*

*Senior Policy Advisor, Office of Disability Employment Policy*

*U.S. Department of Labor*

Robert Trombley shared the federal efforts to improve employment outcomes from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). ODEP, within the U.S. Department of Labor, promotes policies and coordinates with employers and all levels of government to increase workplace success for people with disabilities. ODEP’s mission is to develop and influence policies that increase the number and quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The initiatives covered included youth transition, the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth (CAPE-Youth), inclusive apprenticeships, SSI youth solutions, Guideposts for Success, and federal partnerships. A number of resources and reports were also shared.

The CAPE-Youth initiative is a consortium of partners that focuses on career pathways, systems coordination, professional development, and COVID-19 resources. Youth with disabilities were disproportionately affected by the disruption of services, including receiving appropriate special education, related services, and accommodations, among other programs and services during the pandemic. CAPE-Youth conducted a national scan on state-level responses to COVID-19 that focused on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the transition of youth and young adults with disabilities. Some of the upcoming research that CAPE-Youth will focus on is a mixed-methods study on collaboration in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act systems, qualitative research on professional development for youth service providers, a study on pre-employment transition services, and a scan of state programs and policies for youth and young adults with disabilities.

**RSA’s Portion of the ICDR: Federal Efforts to Improve Employment Outcomes**

*Mary Lovley*

*Director, Training and Service Programs Division*

*Acting Chief, Training Programs Unit*

*Rehabilitation Services Administration*

*Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services*

*U.S. Department of Education*

Mary Lovley shared some of the projects that the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) has that specifically address the quality of employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities, including students and youth in transition from school to post-school activities and employment. Pre-employment transition services and transition services under the Rehabilitation Act are provided by the state VR agencies. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act transition services or the special education transition services are provided by state education agencies and local education agencies. VR agencies provide opportunities for students and youth with disabilities to practice and improve workplace skills such as through internships and other work-based learning opportunities.

RSA supports current TA centers:

* Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center – Quality Management (RSA)
* Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center – Quality Employment (RSA)
* National Technical Assistance Center on Improving Transition to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students with Disabilities, known as the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (Joint Office of Special Education Programs-RSA project)

Another project, the Transition Work-Based Learning Model Demonstration, focuses on identifying, developing, implementing, and evaluating work-based learning models that are supported by evidence and will help students with disabilities prepare for postsecondary education and competitive integrated employment. Lastly, the Innovative Rehabilitation Training Program focuses on developing new and improved training programs for rehabilitation personnel. In FY 2019, RSA awarded seven projects; in FY 2020, they awarded two additional grants.

## Q&A and Discussion

**Q: How can federal agencies ensure that their efforts address equity so that outcomes are equitable across states and populations?**

A: Mr. Trombley noted that equity is considered in all of their work. They are currently developing briefs examining intersectionality and what that means in recovering from the pandemic. Equity is also a focus of an upcoming brief on trauma-informed care. Ms. Cobb shared that SSA also considers equity in their work. They are looking at how to improve outreach and education to specific communities to increase and improve equity. Ms. Lovley also noted that ED is building equity language into all of their work so that it is considered up-front.

**Q: Are there federal agency plans to fund demonstrations that look at youth who are no longer in school or not in work, or who otherwise became disconnected to the system?**

A: Ms. Lovley shared that while they do not have additional demonstration dollars in their budget, the congressional justification did include additional demonstration dollars for RSA, though it is not clear where those funds will go.

# Panel 5: Employers and the Future of Work

**Moderator:** *John R. Johnson, Ph.D., Director, Research and Development, South Dakota Center for Disabilities, Sanford School of Medicine, University of South Dakota*

**Employers and the Future of Work**

*David M. Mank, Ph.D.*

*Professor Emeritus*

*Indiana University*

Dr. David Mank shared some of the lessons learned from this pandemic. First, while more was learned about people with disabilities working essential jobs, more research is needed to get a better understanding of people with disabilities working in these jobs. Next, the importance of virtual supports was highlighted during the pandemic, as well as the benefits of remote work and work-from-home options. These will change how employment and employment agencies are thought of going forward. The need for technology access and fluency was also underscored, as well as the need for job coaches and employment consultants to have solid access to technology.

Dr. Mank also discussed the new era of employer relationships. He noted that there is a need to better understand the capacity needs of employment support providers as the economy opens up following the pandemic. This is also a new opportunity for customized employment. As employers have been rethinking how they do work, it is a perfect opportunity for the field to explore the flexibility that employers have for people with disabilities. He also shared a piece of legislation, the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act, that would create competitive state grants and transformation grants for employment agencies to expand competitive integrated employment.

**Employment for People with Disabilities: Translating Evidence Amid Crisis**

*Erin Riehle, M.S.N., R.N.*

*Founder and Director, Project SEARCH*

*Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center*

Erin Riehle presented research from Project SEARCH on the employment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as critical frontline workers. During the pandemic, Project SEARCH worked to produce practical solutions to minimize the risks of withdrawal from employment. The withdrawal from employment can lead to social isolation and social vulnerabilities. They collected data during 2019–2020 and followed 32,000 young adults primarily with intellectual disabilities and autism through the programs.

Of the essential workers at Cincinnati’s Children’s Hospital, there were approximately 55 employees with significant disabilities. Of those, 16 remained working as essential workers throughout the pandemic. Over the last three months, the remaining employees have since been brought back to work. Through Project SEARCH research, they found that the biggest hurdle for these employees was social distancing.

**A Joint Initiative: The Disability Equality Index**

*Jill Houghton*

*President and CEO*

*Disability:IN*

Jill Houghton shared information about Disability:IN and the Disability Equality Index (DEI). Disability:IN is an organization that empowers businesses to achieve disability inclusion and equality. The DEI is a comprehensive benchmarking tool that helps companies build a road map of measurable, tangible actions. Participating companies receive a score on a scale of zero to 100, with those earning 80 and above recognized as “Best Places to Work for Disability Inclusion.” The DEI is currently made up of six categories: culture and leadership, enterprise-wide access, employment practices, community engagement, supplier diversity, and non-U.S. operations.

Using data from this year’s DEI, Disability:IN worked with Accenture to build a business case that demonstrated that companies that were participating in the DEI and working to advance disability inclusion had 28 percent higher revenue, two times the net income, 30 percent stronger profits, and two times stronger shareholder returns than their peers that were not prioritizing disability inclusion and participating in the DEI. The DEI survey questions live in the public domain for anyone who is interested in reading them.

## Q&A and Discussion

**Q: What are some futuristic approaches that we can take regarding the implementation of the transition needs of youth and young adults with disabilities, and what are some platforms we might consider to deliver that?**

A: Ms. Riehle said that the disability community, along with businesses, will need to address the ability of people with disabilities to work remotely. She also said that there will need to be virtual job coaching and virtual follow-along. There also needs to be a focus on ensuring that agencies survive, especially those that service rural areas. Ms. Houghton agreed and added that if companies want to separate themselves and demonstrate that they are a company truly committed to equity and inclusion for all, then having a flexible work accommodation will be a key ingredient. She also added that accessibility of the digital environment will be critical. Dr. Mank noted that we need to understand the data on individuals with disabilities who were thriving in the pandemic, referencing some of the data from Ms. Riehle’s presentation. He also said that we need a new baseline of best practices as well as a national discussion on getting the right technology to people with disabilities.

**Q: Social connectivity can be a significant challenge of having a disability. How does the digitization of work impact social networking and social connectivity?**

A: Ms. Houghton noted that this is a significant concern, and conversations should involve service providers, government, and businesses about what the future might look like. Ms. Riehle noted that there are many new players in the field of hiring people with disabilities, including places like distribution centers. Dr. Mank noted that the pandemic has accelerated the moving online of most everyday things and noted that we should be ensuring that these digital environments are accessible to people with disabilities.

**Q: How do we ensure that we can capture the stories of people as we move into the future versus just looking at data?**

A: Dr. Mank noted that while data is important, it can be dry, and we need a way to incorporate stories to back up the data that is being collected. Ms. Houghton agreed, saying that Disability:IN is working to collect those stories and make that human connection.

# Symposium Summary

**Facilitator:** *Kelli Thuli Crane, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor, Center for Transition and Career Innovation, University of Maryland*

Dr. Kelli Crane summarized the symposium, pointing to the common themes of solutions to breaking down the long-standing barriers that people with disabilities face in accessing employment and education. Presenters shared innovative research through the lenses of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Dr. Crane highlighted that the pandemic required stay-at-home orders, limited business operations, and put other restrictions in place to ensure the health and safety of the general public, much of which changed the way individuals learn and work. People with disabilities were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, both directly and indirectly, which further compounded some of their circumstances. During the pandemic, people with disabilities were more likely to lose jobs, and they had limited access to important pre-employment transitions services. The pandemic also further highlighted the equity gaps within the systems that prepare youth for work. Where virtual services were available, people with disabilities did not always have the supports or technology to engage in these services or remote work opportunities.

The following are some of the themes and lessons learned from panelists related to employment, education, and supports services.

## Employment

As businesses prepare to hire again and individuals are starting to seek work, there is evidence that people with disabilities are still struggling. A common theme across the panels was to identify what is working and remedy what is not working. Some of the strategies related to employment included:

* Internships with systematic instruction, followed by customized and supported employment, led to higher rates of competitive integrated employment for persons with autism.
* Self-employment is often ignored as a potential option in transition planning for youth with disabilities. There is a need to more widely consider this option and find more ways to expose youth to this type of work.
* The pandemic was disruptive for many service providers, but there has been recognition of the value of virtual options. Many community agencies will continue to offer virtual services that provide flexibility and more individual person-centered services.
* There is evidence that with virtual options, there is greater engagement of youth and their family members in planning for services.

## Education

The pandemic exacerbated exclusion from education for many youths with disabilities. As students were struggling through learning, educators needed time to figure out what worked and what did not. Learnings from the pandemic included:

* Students with disabilities were the least likely to benefit from remote learning. This was in large part due to inequities in the access to technologies to support their remote learning.
* Youth with disabilities experienced major disruptions in skills training, which prepares them for the workforce. Now that businesses are hiring again, many students lack the basic work preparation skills to gain entry-level positions.
* In some instances, as seen in Project SEARCH data, there has been an increase in employment numbers for individuals with disabilities.
* As a result of school closures, many young people have experienced loss in their peer relationships, which impacts their social competence.
* Evidence shows that postsecondary education promotes financial stability and social mobility, so there needs to be a continued effort to connect students to educational opportunities beyond high school.

## Support Services

The pandemic impacted support systems and service providers, including mental health services, employment services, and transportation services. Several presenters discussed the need to reimagine how services are delivered.

* There have been some positive changes that have come out due to COVID-related shifts in services. There is a need to capitalize on those strategies that worked and continue to research and expand them.
* The importance of the involvement of VR counselors in other services and programs, including intensive and creative case management, was highlighted. There is also a need to create VR service environments that embrace and participate in these evidence-based practices.
* Engaging family members in the education planning and career development process will be important as individuals begin moving back into work and education.

## Three Takeaways

In sum, Dr. Crane shared three of the biggest ideas of the symposium.

1. There is a need to focus on the whole person to improve employment and education outcomes, requiring attention and investment in youth in the context of family. Factors like individual housing situations, food security, health care, and transportation are all important to consider.
2. There is a need to promote cross-agency investments in order to address policy strategies that are critical to streamlining services and supports that youth receive. This can be done by sharing research, policy data, and implementation activities across agencies. By doing this, we will provide that critical foundation for aligning services and supports to youth and families at the state and local levels, and in turn provide better access and utilization of these services.
3. The evidence suggests that exposure to work results in better employment outcomes, so there is a need to offer progression of career services early and often.

## Participant Responses

Following the symposium, participants were asked to reflect on the symposium by sharing which ideas resonated with them; what policies, practices, or interventions still need development; and the biggest knowledge gap in need of more research. The following were submitted by participants.

**Q: What ideas resonated with you?**

* Cross-federal agency investments in demonstrations are important.
* There is a strong connection between poverty and disability.
* 301 re-evaluations are important.
* Research is positive and beneficial to the cause.
* We need to be careful with how we describe benefits so that we are not unintentionally placing expectation limits on what a person might do.

**Q: What policies, practices, or interventions need development?**

* Research and policies to increase uptake on SSA work incentives need more development.
* Development of Memorandums of Understanding or data agreements for cross-agency data sharing for both service delivery and research.
* Special education redesigns for transition need more development.
* We need more development in obtaining placement for students in competitive employment opportunities.

**Q: What is the biggest knowledge gap in need of research?**

* The adjustment (increase) in substantial gainful activity levels as an incentive for employment.
* The impact of poverty remediation and meeting basic needs (i.e., transportation, housing, food) as a strategy for increasing employment and engagement of employers on the demand side.
* There were so few projects that looked at the role of accommodations/technology. Technology can be a means for the student/employee to provide their own supports independently.