

Pathways to Careers: A Case Study in Customized Employment Executive Summary



SourceAmerica[®] has been a leading job creator for people with disabilities for more than 45 years. It has a nationwide network of community-based nonprofit agencies and has seen firsthand what works – and what doesn’t – when it comes to disability employment and inclusion. One of the most promising paths for improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities is through customized employment (CE). CE refers to competitive integrated employment (CIE) for individuals with a significant disability and focuses on their talents and interests as well as the supports they would need to succeed in the workplace. It also considers employers’ needs and business objectives. In short, it matches the right person to the right job and provides them with the support they need to succeed.

The *Pathways to Careers: A Case Study in Customized Employment* report provides a snapshot of outcomes from SourceAmerica’s Pathways to Careers[®] (Pathways), a multi-year project and CE service model that connected people with significant intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) and people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to competitive integrated employment. Pathways provided unique and valuable insights on how to tap into the potential of CE for people with disabilities.

SourceAmerica launched Pathways at demonstration sites in Clearfield, UT; Detroit, MI; Oakton, VA; and Dorchester, MA. More than 170 individuals with significant barriers to employment participated in Pathways and 97 individuals secured jobs with full wages, benefits, and opportunities for future advancement. The project raised awareness and interest with 300 employer partners, made possible an overwhelming number of employment success stories, and contributed to new and innovative human services approaches at the demonstration providers: PARC, JVS Detroit, ServiceSource, and WORK, Inc.

The lessons learned and recommendations outlined below are the direct result of the commitment of staff and leadership at the Pathways demonstration sites. The findings contained in the full report detail what was learned about CE and the potential it represents for provider transformation, leading to long-term positive impacts for the disability community. These findings are based on qualitative data collected by Mathematica from Pathways agency staff through interviews, programmatic information, and participant surveys.

SourceAmerica is leveraging these lessons to improve upon its service offerings and expand its reach and impact as a technical center for CE service delivery, a collaborator with state and federal agencies and academic institutions, and an advocate for essential policies needed to drive significant improvement in the employment situation of people with disabilities.

Lessons Learned

CE offers one of the most promising paths for improving employment outcomes for people with significant disabilities.

Many people previously left out of the workforce found employment through Pathways – some for the first time in their lives – highlighting how effective CE is at connecting those with significant disabilities to career opportunities. Though the scale of the demonstration project was small in terms of the staggering number of people with disabilities who are out of the workforce, Pathways serves as a model for achieving the outcomes envisioned by public policy if the necessary resources are in place.

There is no one-size-fits-all model. Flexibility is a key to success.

Successful implementation of CE best practices must consider the local context, including the unique features of the agency delivering CE, the local labor market, and regional factors. For example, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency reimbursement rates and Medicaid Day Waiver rates differ widely across states. Local economic conditions and employment practices may also influence the effectiveness of CE best practices.

A sustainable funding stream is needed to expand offerings and maximize outcomes.

Pathways demonstration sites used a patchwork of various funding sources to sustain their CE activities. Funding needs were compounded by other challenges, including difficulties recruiting and retaining staff; the need to adjust service delivery models due to a variety of unexpected developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and countering ongoing misconceptions regarding people with disabilities and the value they bring to the workforce.

Investments in CE have the potential to pay for themselves.

The ideal outcome for a significant improvement in the employment situation of people with disabilities is a virtuous economic cycle where individuals are able to rise out of poverty, and local, state, and federal governments reduce the cost of ongoing supports. SourceAmerica’s experience with Pathways demonstrates that such an outcome may be possible on a broader scale if policymakers recognize the economic and social gains that could be made through investment in evidence-based CE services.

	<p>159 Number of participants who completed Discovery</p>
	<p>236 Number of completed internships</p>
	<p>97 Number of participants secured competitive employment</p>
<p>74.2% of participants completed an internship</p>	
<p>25.9 Average tenure (in months) in competitive employment</p>	

Recommendations

Federal Action: The results of Pathways point to the need for Congress to reintroduce and pass the bipartisan Customized Approaches to Providing and Building Independent Lives of Inclusion for Transition-aged Youth (CAPABILITY) Act of 2019. The CAPABILITY Act addressed the critical need for CE models that maximize the skills and talents of America’s youth with disabilities. The CAPABILITY Act was designed to launch programs resulting in customized work opportunities that expand access to fair-wage jobs in integrated workplaces and promote independent living and modern job skills.

Key components of the CAPABILITY Act, informed by SourceAmerica’s experiences with Pathways, included:

- the delivery of evidence-based services to transition-aged youth with disabilities;
- dedicated funding to build capacity within provider organizations and promote long-term sustainability;
- development of models for replication in other states; and
- competition across states for funding based on their ability to steward resources to provider organizations and maintain high standards for outcome evaluation.

State Action: State legislatures should use the CAPABILITY Act as a blueprint to develop new policies that invest in the future of their economies and constituents. State leaders must recognize that the cycle of exclusion and poverty experienced by people with disabilities must be broken. Policymakers within states have the unique opportunity to lead the way through innovative approaches that can shape national trends.

Include CE in policy planning and discussions: CE is often overlooked in policymaking discussions about disability employment. As America looks to a future where CIE for people with disabilities is the norm rather than the exception, CE must be part of the conversation. It should not be an afterthought when it comes to funding programs for people with disabilities, creating regulations and policies that impact people with disabilities, and developing economic recovery efforts. Lawmakers at the federal and state levels should ensure that CE services and accompanying funding are consistently included in employment legislation impacting people with disabilities.

The full *Pathways to Careers: A Case Study in Customized Employment* report is available at (SourceAmerica.org). For more information, contact Amy Stapley at ASTapley@SourceAmerica.org.