



# Challenges and Barriers to Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in California

CPCIDD Employment Report | December 2025



## Integrity, impact, and inclusion.

The California Policy Center for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CPCIDD) is a non-partisan, non-profit policy center established to identify best practices that inform, support, and improve upon statewide policies that impact the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Center's focus is to identify priorities within the IDD community and provide policy recommendations based on objective, evidence-based research, data, and policy analysis to help inform the community, as well as the policymaking process.

## Introduction

Research shows that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience significant disparities in access to gainful and meaningful employment as they have drastically higher unemployment rates when compared to people without disabilities. In an effort to address employment disparities for adults with IDD the California legislature passed, and Governor Brown signed, Assembly Bill 1041 in 2013 making California an Employment First state. As a result, California adopted an official policy prioritizing competitive integrated employment (CIE) for people with disabilities. However, despite being an Employment First state, the employment rate for Californians with IDD continues to remain very low as those rates have ranged from 12.4% - 17.2% in the years between 2008 – 2023.<sup>1,2</sup>

There are many complex factors that contribute to the disparities in employment for people with IDD including, but not limited to, systemic barriers, low expectations, and employer misconceptions. To gain a better understanding of the challenges, barriers, and successes to employment for people with IDD the California Policy Center for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CPCIDD), with funding from Ability Central, conducted eleven roundtable discussions with employers, supported employment providers, individuals with IDD, family members, and regional center employment specialists throughout the state, as well as five one-to-one interviews with employers and supported employment providers who preferred to share their perspectives privately.

The roundtable discussions provided for in-depth discussions about the importance of employment for people with IDD, the challenges and barriers experienced from multiple perspectives, and strategies or policy changes that could increase employment opportunities for people with IDD in California.

## Employer Perspective

Lack of employer engagement or willingness to hire people with IDD is cited as one of the most common barriers to employment for people with IDD.<sup>3</sup> Understanding and effectively addressing underlying concerns of the employer is critical to improving employment opportunities and sustained employment for individuals with IDD. The employer roundtables and one-to-one interviews provided an opportunity to hear directly from employers about concerns, challenges, and/or successes they have had in hiring people with IDD. The employers who participated in the roundtables were representative of a wide range of employer types and sizes as they ranged from small employers (less than 10 employees) to large (over 2,000 employees) as well as public employers (state and county with over 22,000 employees).

Employers were asked a series of questions that included disability specific and non-disability specific questions. The first two questions were general questions aimed at understanding the employer perspective on what they consider to be the most important qualities in an employee, and how they go about recruiting for employees. Below is a summary of employer responses related to important qualities.

<sup>1</sup>California State Council of Developmental Disabilities, Employment Dashboard [https://scdd.ca.gov/ca\\_empl\\_rate/](https://scdd.ca.gov/ca_empl_rate/)

<sup>2</sup>California Department of Developmental Services, Employment Dashboard <https://www.dds.ca.gov/rc/dashboard/employment/>

<sup>3</sup>Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation (2024), Perceptions and Bias of Small Business Leaders in Employing People with Different Types of Disabilities <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1180154/>

## Important Qualities for Employees

Opportunities to build soft skills are cited as critical to successful employment for people with IDD.<sup>4</sup> Consistent with the research, all the employers said they look for employees with strong soft skills, specifically skills in the areas of communication, time management, problem-solving, willingness to learn, and teamwork. The following are several examples that employers provided with regard to the type of soft skills they are looking for:

- **Effective Communication:** employees need to be able to clearly and concisely convey information, actively listen to others, maintain respectful interactions, and share feedback when appropriate. It should be noted that employers wanted to make clear that they were not specifically talking about

the person having verbal communication but rather the ability to effectively communicate with their supervisors, co-workers, customers, and others in the work environment.

- **Time Management:** employers expressed several areas of time management that were essential for employees to have in order to maintain their employment including being on time to work, return from breaks timely, and manage time on duties, projects, and tasks.
- **Problem Solving:** employers reported – placing a high value on problem solving skills and often include interview questions to test those skills. They want to know that prospective employees would be able to identify the problem (should one occur), think of some potential solutions, and either implement or ask for further direction on finding a solution to the problem.

<sup>4</sup>Inclusion (2017) Vol. 5, No. 1, *Exploring the Impact of Community Service on Career Exploration, Self Determination, and Social Skills for Transition Age Youth with Autism*



- **Willingness to Learn:** unless the job requires very technical skills most employers said they are willing to train employees on the skills needed for the job as long as the employee demonstrated a willingness and ability to learn the job
- **Teamwork:** employers look for alignment between the person's skills, personality, interests, and the interpersonal skills necessary for being part of the team and fitting onto the culture of the company

## Recruiting Practices and Methods

For many individuals with IDD recruiting practices and methods of recruitment can be one of the first barriers they face when trying to get a job. Online applications, complex questionnaires, poorly designed application portals, timeout restrictions, and other inaccessible application processes can pose significant barriers for people with IDD when they are applying for jobs. For example, several employers reported a multi-step process that begins with filling out an online application, software or artificial intelligence (AI) application screening, and scheduling one or more interviews with a prospective employee. This process can be especially challenging for people with IDD as it is not uncommon for AI programs to inadvertently discriminate against people with disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

The main recruitment methods used by employers included posting openings on Indeed, attending job fairs and other networking opportunities, and seeking potential employees from supported employment providers who they have

established relationships with. There were two large employers who reported having an ongoing relationship with one or more supported employment providers. When they have an open position they often check with the provider to see if they may have someone who would be a good fit for the position.

## Job Coaches

The next series of questions centered on whether the employer currently has (or has previously employed) people with IDD, their experiences with job coaches, and if they felt prepared to hire and employ people with IDD. The majority of participating employers either have current employees with IDD or have hired people with IDD in the past, however, there were a few employers who have not employed people with IDD but were interested and seeking additional information about hiring people with IDD.

The employers who have hired people with IDD reported that they have worked with a job coach in one or more of the hires. The feedback related to job coaches was mixed as some employers reported having good experiences while others reported being very unsatisfied with the experience. The employer experiences underscore findings that a well-trained job coach is critical and successful employment is often dependent upon the skills and competence of the job coach.<sup>6</sup>

Employers who had good experiences with job coaches identified the following traits in the job coaches that contributed to their good experience and willingness to continue to hire people with IDD:

<sup>5</sup>Rocky Mountain ADA Center, *How Does Using Artificial Intelligence in the Hiring Process Impact People with Disabilities* <https://rockymountainada.org/resources/research/how-does-using-artificial-intelligence-ai-hiring-process-impact-people>

<sup>6</sup>Inclusion (2022) Vol. 10, No. 4 A Scoping Review of the Competence of Employment Specialists Supporting Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

- Coaches clearly communicated what their role was to the employer specifically that they were there to support the individual to learn the job but not to do the job for them
- They help facilitate communication and relationships with co-workers and supervisors rather than talking for the person
- Provide frequent feedback to co-workers and supervisors about what natural supports are and how those supports are used to include the person
- Coaches provided a contact number in case the employer had questions or felt the person needed additional support



Employers who did not have good experiences with job coaches acknowledged a reluctance to hire someone who needed a job coach again. They felt the experience cost them too much time and money as the employee was not being properly trained or supported so there was a loss in productivity. Employers identified the following traits in job coaches that contributed to an unsatisfactory experience:

- Job coaches who show up late and unprepared to support the person
- Being distracted and on their phone instead of providing more direct guidance to the person they are there to support
- Talking for the person or acting as a “go between” with co-workers, supervisors, and the individual
- Doing the job for the person and then when they leave the person doesn’t have the skills to do the job

## Employer Preparedness

Few studies have examined employer capacity or competence to hire and support individuals with IDD however findings from the studies that have been done show that employers who participated in an employer preparation program reported positive experiences hiring and working with people with IDD.<sup>7</sup> Other important findings included:

- Employers who were willing to participate in employer preparation programs strongly related to their willingness to hire people with IDD on a permanent basis
- Employers who previously hired people with IDD were more likely to hire people with IDD in the future

<sup>7</sup>Inclusion (2022) Vol.10, *Employers' Perspectives on Individuals with IDD in Community Integrated Employment Settings: A Scoping Review*

- Employers who felt prepared and hired employees with IDD reported increased employee engagement, productivity, and retention

A few of the employers said they felt fully prepared to hire and work with individuals with IDD but rather they “learned” as they went. For some of the employers the experience was good while others reported challenges figuring out how to best communicate with the individuals and/or prepare their co-workers to do the same. Employers who experienced the greatest challenges had two commonalities which included a limited or lack of understanding about the role of the job coach and a disconnect between the person hiring (i.e. human resources or hiring managers) and upper management (i.e. department heads or supervisors) in terms of expectations for support and onboarding.

Employers identified the following as significant barriers to hiring and employing people with IDD:

- Fear of being sued for discrimination if the employment doesn't work out
- Understanding reasonable accommodations – what they are, how to implement, how to ask someone if they need reasonable accommodations without violating individual privacy, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints, and who to ask for support on reasonable accommodations
- Reliable transportation so people can get to work on time
- Employees (prospective employees) who can only work 12 – 15 hours a week because they don't want to lose their benefits [It is worth noting that several of the employers wanted employees to work least 20 hours a week]
- Unprepared or inconsistent job coaches

- Lack of support for employer after the job coach period ends
- Some unions do not allow state sponsored internships which can limit the ability to participate in the Paid Internship Program (PIP)
- The Paid Internship Program (PIP) can take too long and employers can't always wait for the position to be filled so they hire someone else

The roundtables and interviews included employers who had long-standing successes in hiring people with IDD, employers who were relatively new to hiring and employing people with IDD, as well as some who did not have experience but were interested in learning more. The discussion led to several recommendations for how to better support employers who hire or want to hire people with IDD including:

- Business mentorship programs where more experienced businesses can mentor new businesses
- Open roundtable discussions like the discussions held for this report where employers can ask questions and learn more without being afraid of a grievance being filed
- Develop a “Welcome Basket” for employers that includes important information and resources related to hiring and employing people with IDD

**Employers who experienced the greatest challenges had two commonalities: a limited or lack of understanding about the role of the job coach and a disconnect between the person hiring and upper management.**

- Create and market a one stop shop to learn info about hiring people with disabilities [guide or website]
- Statewide awareness campaign that highlights employers with inclusive hiring practices and promotes hiring people with IDD

Employers who reported successful and positive experiences hiring and employing people with IDD shared some of the practices they felt contributed to the overall success including:

- Business to Business Mentorship Programs – several of the businesses that had experience hiring and employing people with IDD were part of a local business advisory council that met routinely and shared information about their practices
- Employee mentorship programs – practices included matching current employees who had either been trained, or had experience supporting people with IDD, with new employees with IDD to provide support in navigating the workplace
- Consistent Support from Supported Employment Providers – this included having well prepared job coaches who supported the employer by making sure the employer (especially the supervisor) felt comfortable asking questions and had a contact person who they could reach out to if needed
- Supportive Co-Workers and workplace culture that encourage support and inclusion, this was especially successful when the supervisors consistently demonstrated and encouraged a supportive work environment
- Established Community Partnerships – some employers had long-standing relationships with supported employment providers who they worked with to fill open positions
- Experienced Talent Acquisition Specialists – two of the large employers reported increasing employment of people with

IDD as a result of having Talent Acquisition Specialists who were hired to increase overall diversity and inclusion but also had experience supporting people with IDD in the workplace and incorporating inclusive strategies in the hiring process (i.e., inclusive job descriptions, accessibility, flexible interviews, etc.)

## Employment Services Provider Perspective

Supported Employment is a service model that helps individuals with disabilities obtain and maintain competitive jobs in the community through ongoing and personalized support, including but not limited to, job coaching and skills development. Supported Employment Providers (vendors) provide a range of services including job development, job coaching, ongoing support for job retention, pre-employment transition services, career counseling, transportation, benefits counseling, assistance to employers, and other important services that support the individual seeking employment.

Roundtable discussions and interviews were conducted with supported employment providers throughout the state to learn more about their perspectives on the challenges, barriers, and successes to employment for people with IDD. Their responses focused on four main areas related to challenges and barriers to successful employment for people with IDD including (1) regulatory/statutory, (2) workforce, (3) rates/codes, and (4) disincentives/other issues impeding employment.

## Regulatory and Statutory Barriers

The regulatory and statutory barriers identified include the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) requirement for

Supported Employment Providers, the face-to-face requirement for job coaching and job development services, and changes to the continuum of employment services as a result of the elimination of 14c.

## Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities

The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) is an independent non-profit organization that accredits health and human services programs.<sup>8</sup> To become CARF accredited supported employment and/or work activity program providers are required to be vendorized by the regional center, initiate the formal process of accreditation or reaccreditation, purchase the standards manual which outlines the 1,500 standards for evaluation, conduct a self-assessment against the standards in the manual, apply for the survey, undergo the onsite survey, and participate in the exit conference. The process for accreditation can take 6 – 18 months and cost thousands of dollars depending on the size of the organization.

Habilitation services, also referred to as employment services, are defined as community-based services purchased or provided for adults with developmental disabilities including services provided under Work Activity Programs (WAPs) and Supported Employment Programs (both group and individual), to prepare and maintain adults at their highest level of vocational functioning, or to prepare them for Vocational Rehabilitation services.<sup>9</sup> These services are provided by community based service providers who are vendedored by the regional

center to provide those services. Current regulations prohibit Regional Centers from purchasing Habilitation services from vendors who are not CARF accredited, unless they have a conditional acceptance as part of their vendorization process.<sup>10</sup> A conditional acceptance based on CARF accreditation requires the provider to be CARF accredited within four years of initial vendorization.

The vast majority of employment service providers identified CARF accreditation as an overly burdensome and expensive requirement that is unnecessary and duplicative given they are required to comply with existing laws such as the Rehabilitation Act, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Medicaid regulations, and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), as well as the regional center vendorization process, program design, documentation, staffing, and training requirements established in the California Code of Regulations.

The Department of Developmental Services (DDS) recently (2021-2022) implemented the Quality Incentive Program (QIP) which is a program developed to provide incentive payments to services providers who meet or exceed specific quality measures to improve outcomes and service quality for individuals served by the regional center system. The QIP measures are developed

**The vast majority of employment service providers identified CARF accreditation as an overly burdensome and expensive requirement that is unnecessary and duplicative.**

<sup>8</sup>Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities <https://carf.org/about/>

<sup>9</sup>California Code of Regulations, Title 17, Div.2, Ch.3, § 54302(34)

<sup>10</sup>California Code of Regulations, Title 17, Div.2, Ch.3, § 58810

through the stakeholder process to define quality goals, data infrastructure, collect and analyze provider data, set performance targets, and monitor progress. Employment is one of the six identified focus areas. As such employment service providers argue that the performance measures developed by the DDS, employment service providers, and other stakeholders are more reflective of, and provide for more meaningful measures that directly target, monitor, and evaluate employment services and eliminate the need for CARF accreditation.

## Paid Internship Program – Employer of Record

The Paid Internship Program (PIP) was established in 2016 in an effort to further the state's Employment First Policy by increasing opportunities for individuals served by the regional center system to gain vocational skills and abilities that would lead to employment. Assembly Bill X2-1 (ABX2-1) authorized the DDS to fund the PIP program for individuals who chose, through the Individual Program Plan (IPP) process, to participate in a paid internship.<sup>11</sup> There are three ways in which the intern can be compensated by the employer of record, (EOR) including by:

- Employer (business entity)
- Financial Management Service (FMS)
- Service Provider – Supported Employment Provider

One of the challenges identified by supported employment providers is the determination of who will be the EOR during the internship. Many employers/prospective employers are not willing to be the EOR because they have not actually hired the individual as an



employee during the internship. The majority of supported employment providers said they do not want to be the EOR because it can be very complicated, administratively burdensome, and confusing related to Workers' Compensation codes can increase liability. The other option is to contract with an FMS specifically to act as the EOR during the internship but that option can be limited depending on the availability of such services.

Aside from the EOR issue the majority of supported employment providers felt the PIP was a great opportunity for both the individuals they support and the employers who provide the internship. They reported successful experiences for many of the individuals who participated in the PIP, even if the PIP didn't end in CIE, because they gained work experience, developed both hard and soft

<sup>11</sup>Department of Developmental Services, Directive to Regional Center Executives Directors, Guidelines for Implementation of Changes to the Paid Internship Program [https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CombinedGuidelines\\_PIP\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CombinedGuidelines_PIP_2021.pdf)

employment skills, and got paid wages during the internship. They also feel that the PIP is a benefit to employers because it provides the opportunity to train potential employees at no cost during the internship, onsite support and consultation from job coaches, and increase access to a potential workforce that can help meet the business needs of the employer.

The DDS data shows a consistent increase in utilization of the PIP since it began in fiscal year 2018/2019. However, CIE incentive payment data shows a recent decline in the number of individuals participating in CIE. [Table 1].

**Table 1**

	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23	FY 23/24	FY 24/25 <sup>1</sup>	Total <sup>2</sup>
<b>Paid Internship Program</b>	1,468	1,841	975	1,690	2,600	3,231	3,232	8,100
<b>Competitive Integrated Employment-Incentive Payments</b>	1,779	1,592	1,307	1,878	2,129	1,896	1,221	7,055

<sup>1</sup>FY 24/25 includes data through the third quarter of the fiscal year, July - March 2025.

<sup>2</sup>"Total Unique Individuals for all Fiscal Years" shows the unduplicated individual counts throughout all fiscal years.

\* In accordance with DDS Data De-Identification Guidelines, individual counts under 11 have been suppressed to protect privacy.

\*\* Complementary suppression is applied to protect privacy.



## Changes in the Continuum of Supports for Employment

Senate Bill 639, signed into law in 2021, phased out programs that operated under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) which allowed employer to pay subminimum wages to employees with disabilities when it was determined that their disability impeded their productivity related to the work they perform.<sup>12</sup> Many employment service providers who operated the programs raised concern about the challenge with ensuring people with extensive support needs or complex behaviors have access to the support they need to compete in the labor market. According to the DDS data there were 2,917 individuals who transitioned out of sub-minimum wage programs between July/August 2023 and January 15, 2025. Approximately 30% of those individuals transitioned into group supported employment (704 individuals), individual supported employment (75 individuals), PIP (65 individuals), or CIE (11 individuals).<sup>13</sup>

Many of the participating providers acknowledged that there were some individuals making subminimum wage who were inappropriately placed and should be making at least minimum wage. However, the providers who shared their concerns about the elimination of the FLSA 14(c) Certificate Programs felt it was unfair to people with very complex or significant disabilities because they have much greater challenges and difficulty participating and competing in a competitive labor market. The majority of participating providers also acknowledged that the 14(c) model is an antiquated model of

employment but many felt that the pendulum swung too far the other way given the complete elimination of the program resulted in an all-or-nothing approach to employment. Some of the comments from providers included:

- No one should be making \$0.27 per hour but we also have to be realistic about the skills and abilities of many of the people we support without making them feel like they can't work or contribute to society in some way
- With the passage of SB 639 we lost contracts for group employment because the contracting business was unable to afford minimum wage for each person employed in the group contract. Group employment is still important, especially for people with higher support needs who want to work.
- People with complex needs and significant disabilities lost their jobs – it just deepens the disparities in employment for people who have higher support needs
- Disability is a spectrum that can range from mild to severe so a one-size fits all approach to employment serves to limit options and opportunities for employment for individuals who do not have the skills required to work in CIE

With the passage of SB 639 concerns were raised about the lack of, or limited access to, program alternatives for the individuals who were being phased out of the sheltered workshop programs operating under the 14(c) Certificate programs. In response to these concerns the DDS established Coordinated Career Pathways (CCP). The

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, 14 (c) Certificate Holders, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/workers-with-disabilities/section-14c/certificate-holders#:~:text=The%20certificates%20authorize%20employers%20to,for%20the%20work%20they%20perform>.

<sup>13</sup>Department of Developmental Services, Sub-Minimum Wage Phase Out Final Report (2024) <https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/employment-data/>

CCP program is a new employment service designed specifically for individuals exiting work activity programs, subminimum wage settings, or within two years of exiting post-secondary education to achieve or advance in CIE.<sup>14</sup> Customized Employment (CE) is a personalized approach to employment planning and job development intended to support individuals with higher support needs which is also available under the CCP program. The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) supported employment model was also identified by one of the providers as a model that could help support people with higher support needs. The IPS model was originally designed to support people with serious mental illness. However, recent research suggests it could be a promising model of support for people with autism and other disabilities.<sup>15</sup> Although these models have all been identified as services that could support people with higher support needs many providers shared that those services can be challenging to access and provide for the following reasons:

- There are limited opportunities for customized employment as many employers are still unsure of how that could work for them
- Individuals receiving those services are highly likely to need ongoing and intensive supports but the programs are time-limited
- Job developers need more in-depth training opportunities to understand how to develop customized employment

- Though the IPS model may be highly effective for the harder to place people we serve it is hard to find job coaches trained in that model because it has a mental health component and we definitely do not have the rates to support that

## Workforce Challenges

California, like other states, faces a serious and persistent shortage of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). Job coaches are DSPs who provide direct support to individuals as they prepare for or obtain employment. Employment service providers report ongoing challenges hiring and/or retaining job coaches in numbers sufficient to support the individuals they serve. The historically low wages paid to DSPs is cited as the main reason providers struggle to maintain an adequate workforce. The participating service providers also said that although rate reform did increase the rates for many providers the base rate model assumptions are still tied to minimum wage which limits how much they can pay their job coaches. The low reimbursement rates couple with the sector set minimum wages in health care and fast food make it very difficult for providers to compete in the labor market and attract skilled DSPs.<sup>16</sup>

The majority of supported employment providers reported having a provider level waitlist for their services, some as long as 3 years, as a result of the workforce shortage. Poorly trained, or untrained job coaches can

<sup>14</sup> Department of Developmental Services, Coordinated Career Pathways, [https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/coordinated-career-pathways-ccp-services/#:~:text=Coordinated%20Career%20Pathways%20\(Pathways\)%20is,competitive%20Integrated%20employment%20\(CIE\).](https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/coordinated-career-pathways-ccp-services/#:~:text=Coordinated%20Career%20Pathways%20(Pathways)%20is,competitive%20Integrated%20employment%20(CIE).)

<sup>15</sup> U.C. Davis MIND Institute, New Employment Model for People with Autism and Intellectual Disabilities <https://health.ucdavis.edu/news/headlines/a-new-employment-model-for-people-with-autism-and-intellectual-disabilities-/2023/06>

<sup>16</sup> California Policy Center for IDD, Impact of the DSP Workforce Shortage in Individuals Served by the Regional Center System and Their Families, [https://www.cpcidd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CPCIDD\\_Report\\_Jan2025.pdf](https://www.cpcidd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CPCIDD_Report_Jan2025.pdf)

be detrimental to getting a job, maintaining a job, and in some instances even cost the individual the employment opportunity. The providers all agreed that there is a clear need to invest in developing a well-trained and competent job coach workforce as it is imperative to increasing employment for people with IDD. However, they also said that although they pay their job coaches above minimum wage there is still a significant disconnect between the training, skills, and experience required of a well-prepared job coach and the wages they make.

## Employment Service Codes and Rates

Employment services can be billed for under service codes 950 (supported employment – group), 952 (supported employment-individual) and 954 (work activity program). Additionally, some providers use the service codes 605 (adaptive skills trainer) or other service codes under the umbrella of tailored day services (TDS) to bill for employment services, however service codes 055 and 063 are being phased out beginning January 1, 2025 as part of rate reform.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the providers shared that they had negotiated rates under service code 055 which were higher than those established under rate reform. Providers using this code were required to submit a program redesign to transition to another service code and if their rate under 055 was higher than the new rates established under rate reform were “held harmless” but will experience a rate reduction in line with the rates established through rate reform beginning March 1,

**The providers all agree that there is a clear need to invest in developing a well-trained and competent job coach workforce as it is imperative to increasing employment for people with IDD.**

2026. The providers phasing out of the 055 service code and receiving lower rates also shared their concerns about the new rates and the challenges they will experience as a result, some fear that they will have to close their programs or reduce services, including employment services. Some providers file for an exemption that was created for certain services codes, including the 055 and 063 service codes. The exemption allows providers to continue to use those specific codes when they provide unique services that do not align with the new service descriptions or have specific circumstances that require a different rate structure. However, the exemptions must be approved by the DDS and providers operating under the exemption will remain at the same rate until they move to another service code.<sup>18</sup>

## Job Coaches

Job coach services are billed under the above-mentioned service codes which are all based on a service based billing system in California. This means that the job coach must be actively providing services (face-to-face requirement) to the individual they support for that time to be considered billable.<sup>19</sup> However, there are some duties of a job coach that are not face-to-face but are still critical to

<sup>17</sup>Department of Developmental Services, Directive P-2024-Rate Reform-002REV, Service Code Crosswalk, January 22, 2025 <https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/P-2024-Rate-Reform-002-REV-Service-Code-Crosswalk.pdf>

<sup>18</sup>Department of Developmental Services, D-2024, Rate Reform - 002 [https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Attachment\\_A\\_D-2024-RateReform-002\\_RateReform\\_Implementation\\_Special\\_Circumstances.pdf](https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Attachment_A_D-2024-RateReform-002_RateReform_Implementation_Special_Circumstances.pdf)

<sup>19</sup>California Code of Regulations, Title 17, § 58881

supporting the individual to achieve and maintain employment. Some of the critical non face-to-face duties can include meeting with the employer, co-workers, other service providers, evaluating progress, developing strategies and job analysis to better support the individual and other “behind the scenes” activities that support long-term successful employment. Yet if those activities are not provided in the presence of the individual supported they are not considered billable. All of the participating employment service providers experience challenges balancing the billable versus non-billable time for job coaching services and feel that greater flexibility is needed to ensure optimal support.

Providers also discussed the need to consider acuity and the level of support an individual may need to obtain and maintain employment. The current rate structure does not account for the “harder to place” individuals who may have a criminal record, complex behavioral needs, significant challenges with communication, or other circumstances that make it harder for them to obtain or maintain employment. The providers who serve individuals who are considered harder to place said that those individuals require a highly skilled and experienced job coach, however, the rates are insufficient to attract a job coach with that experience so people with higher level of need often have less opportunity for employment. Further, providers acknowledged the need to develop and train job coaches to support people with more complex needs but also said that the time and cost associated with training and supervising a job coach to reach that level of skill is

substantial and beyond what the rate model provides for.<sup>20</sup>

## Job Development

The Department of Developmental Services established a new subcode (SEP-IP-1D0) under Employment Service Code 952 which became effective January 1, 2025. This new code is a time-limited service that allows for staff time to assist an individual with activities involved in preparing for and securing competitive integrated employment on a 1:1 basis.<sup>21</sup> The newly established code is intended to support individuals who are either pending eligibility or determined ineligible for employment services through the Department of Rehabilitation. Reimbursement for this new service is also limited to time spent face-to-face with the individual which can be done in-person or via technology. It is important to note that this service is not the same as services provided by a Job Developer because Job Development services are 1:1 services provided to a specific individual as authorized through the IPP process, whereas Job Developers provide systemic employment support and recruit new employers willing to hire a variety of people with IDD.

## Job Developer

Lack of employer engagement is a significant barrier to employment for people with IDD.<sup>22</sup> One strategy to increase employer engagement is for service providers to hire a dedicated Job Developer to build capacity and network within the employer community. A Job Developer is a workforce development

<sup>20</sup>Department of Developmental Services, Rate Models by Regional Center <https://www.dds.ca.gov/rc/vendor-provider/rate-reform/rate-models/>

<sup>21</sup>Department of Developmental Services, Regional Center Directive, Job Development Service Description and Program Addendum [https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/G-2025-Employment-001\\_JobDevelopmentServiceDescription\\_and\\_ProgramAddendum.pdf](https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/G-2025-Employment-001_JobDevelopmentServiceDescription_and_ProgramAddendum.pdf)

<sup>22</sup>Inclusion (2022) Vol. 10, No. 3, *Employers' Perspectives on Individuals with IDD in the Employment Setting: A Scoping Review*



professional who acts as a liaison between job seekers with IDD and employers to create employment opportunities. They have a unique set of skills that bridge the IDD community and the business community which is essential to increasing opportunities for employment. The role and responsibilities of a Job Developer are centered on building relationships with employers, understanding local labor market trends, identifying the needs of the business community and aligning them with potential employees.

Supported employment providers said their programs and the people they serve could benefit immensely from having a dedicated Job Developer but the current rate structure does not account for that position. The inability to fund the position stems from the requirement that employment services are authorized through an individual's IPP and for the most part require face-to-face service delivery. The providers felt that allowing flexibility within the employment service codes and paying a rate that would attract professional Job Developers who understand

the business side of employment, the support needs of the individuals with disabilities, and the need to balance both while developing and maintain relationships with employers could significantly increase employment opportunities for the people they serve.

Employers and supported employment providers felt that skilled job developers would be in a unique position to further explore and develop the mutually beneficial employment relationships between employers and supported employment providers. They were particularly interested in expanding the successful models described in the roundtable discussions related to the large employers – a grocery chain and a casino – reported that they have established relationships with supported employment providers in their area and consistently hire people from their programs.

## Balancing Public Benefits with Employment

The vast majority of adults served through the regional center system in California receive one or more public benefits which can include Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Childhood Disability Benefit (CDB), Medi-Cal, Medicare, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Housing Assistance, and In-Home Support Services (IHSS). It is common for people with disabilities to receive a monthly cash benefit such as SSI, SSDI, or CDB as well as medical benefits through Medi-Cal and/or Medicare, personal assistance through IHSS, food assistance (SNAP) and housing assistance (HUD), the majority of which are means tested programs. Even slight or inconsistent changes in income can impact a person's eligibility for public benefits or programs ultimately disincentivizing employment for people with disabilities.

Employment service providers often find

that the people they support are fearful of working, or working over a certain amount of hours, because they do not want to risk losing their benefits. It is also common for family members to ask the service provider to limit the number of hours their family member works as they too fear loss of benefits for their family member. Research shows that the complexities associated with public benefits, coupled with the personal financial consequences of potentially losing those benefits dissuade people from maximizing their employment potential.<sup>23</sup> Fear of losing benefits has long been a barrier to employment for people with IDD. Supported employment providers argue that routine benefits counseling support for individuals and their family members, when appropriate, is needed to understand their benefits. They believe this should be made a priority because more people would want work, the number of hours worked would likely increase, and it would help reduce the fear that working will cause a financial hardship.

## Understanding Employment as an Umbrella Concept

Employment is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of arrangements or opportunities to earn an income. Employment service providers stressed the importance of understanding that employment should be recognized in a multitude of ways that extend beyond the traditional full or part-time competitive integrated employment model. Several examples of non-traditional CIE employment were discussed and service providers highlighted the need to elevate these and similar opportunities for people who may want, and thrive, in non-traditional

employment. The following are highlights from the discussion:

- We need to value work for work – a night crew or landscape crew are not always with other non-disabled people but they are making at least minimum wage and there are other non-disabled people who do the same job
- The artist community is made up of all different types of people and there are many artists with IDD who have their pieces in art galleries everywhere – it is a business, they earn money, buy supplies, keep hours, showcase their work, and so many other things that are, or should be, considered real work for real pay. There are several artists with IDD who have their pieces displayed in the Museum of Modern Art – they are professional artists who earn an income but it's not your traditional CIE.
- Micro-enterprises and small business owners with IDD are a booming business – house sitting, dog walking, pool cleaning, make-up artistry, baking, and so many more income generating jobs – most of which are not done side by side with non-disabled people so they are not considered integrated but people enjoy their work and earn an income
- Person-Centered employment should be the goal – not everyone wants to work with other people or for an hourly wage, some people prefer gig work and that should be okay

Emerging research on social entrepreneurship and people with IDD finds that it is a growing trend and suggests further research to explore how people could be supported to pursue it.<sup>24</sup> Social entrepreneurship is a path

<sup>23</sup>Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2015) Vol. 53, No. 4, *The Negative Effect of Public Benefits on Individuals Employment: A Multilevel Analysis of Work Hours*

<sup>24</sup>Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2020) Vol. 58, No. 6, *Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Motivation Among People with Intellectual Disability: Why The Act*

to employment that focuses on addressing social issues through business creating both social and economic value. Self-employment, micro-enterprise, and social entrepreneurship are often used interchangeably as an alternative pathway to employment, however they differ based on their purpose. Self-employment and micro-enterprise tend to be individually focused with the purpose of creating financial stability whereas social entrepreneurship aims to address a social issue and contribute to community well-being. Expanding employment support to include the development of social entrepreneurship could be an opportunity to increase employment for people with IDD.

## Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities/Family Members

Employment is an important part of life for working age adults with IDD as it promotes autonomy, independence, and inclusion. Despite the importance of employment, and the desire to work, many people with IDD experience challenges obtaining employment.<sup>25</sup>

The individuals who participated in the roundtables also reported that they want to work and feel that it was a very important part of life. They shared their experiences related to work experience, job coaches, job readiness programs, challenges obtaining employment, and the value of a job. Families also shared their perspectives on the

processes of supporting their family member in their employment journey.

All of the participating individuals had some work or volunteer experience that ranged from a few months to several years and included:

- Manufacturing/Assembly Line
- Packing/labeling
- Thrift Store
- Advocacy
- Retail
- Clerical
- Restaurant
- Data Entry
- Recycling
- Water Treatment Plant
- Warehouse/Distribution Center

To gain a better understanding of the path to employment we asked what type of employment preparation programs individuals participated in prior to obtaining employment. The most common employment preparation programs were day programs and work activity programs followed by post-secondary education programs that focused on vocation and life skills development. There were also a two individuals who said their families taught them the work skills they needed to get a job.

## Experience with Job Coaches

A job coach provides specialized onsite training to employees with disabilities so they can learn the duties of a job, perform it accurately, efficiently, and safely.<sup>26</sup> The level and type of support is based on the unique

<sup>25</sup>Inclusion (2023) Vol. 11, No. 4, *Supporting Employment Desires of Individual with Intellectual Disability: Communication is Key*

<sup>26</sup>Job Accommodation Network, Job Coaches <https://askjan.org/solutions/Job-Coaches.cfm>

## **Most of the individuals who had paid employment began their employment with a job coach in one or more of their places of employment.**

needs of the person they support. Most of the individuals who had paid employment began their employment with a job coach in one or more of their places of employment. The experiences with job coaches varied with some experiences being described as very bad and some as very good or excellent. The individuals and families who reported bad or very bad experience identified the following as contributing to the bad experience:

- Turnover – changes in the job coaches (especially frequent changes) because it takes time away from learning the job when they have to spend time learning about the new job coach
- Coaches who show up late, leave early, or don't show up at all
- Personality mismatch especially coaches who are too bossy

Individuals and families who reported good or very good experiences with job coaches identified the following as contributing to a good experience:

- One of the most important things a job coach does is help navigate co-worker relationships (including appropriate boundaries) and employer expectations
- Job coach who is patient and explains the job step-by-step
- Hold high expectations for the individual

The question that evoked the most discussion

was whether the roundtable participants felt it was easy or hard to get, and keep, a job. Every participant – both individuals and families – said it is very difficult and at times felt impossible. The following is a summary of an in-depth discussion based on the perspective of all of the participants:

- It is very difficult to get a job because a lot of people do not understand disabilities and that people with disabilities can do a good job just like anyone else
- Employers see people with disabilities as a liability rather than an asset
- I think people with disabilities are actually held to a higher standard because they have to constantly prove they can do the job, that they are worthy of being hired
- Sometimes when employers find out a person needs a job coach they won't hire them because they are unwilling to have a job coach present
- Discrimination is real, people have biases that get in the way of hiring people with disabilities
- Low expectations are a real problem and limit opportunities to get better in a job

## **Parental Expectations and Employment**

It is well-documented throughout the literature that parental expectations of employment for their children with disabilities is a strong predictor of employment. Research also shows that parents can be primary partners in the pursuit of integrated employment for people with IDD.<sup>27</sup> The majority of individuals said that they did not remember talking about employment with their parents or family members at any age. The individuals who

<sup>27</sup>Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2023) Vol. 63, No.2, *More Than a Paycheck: Parent Perspectives on Meaningful Work for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities*

## **It was widely acknowledged by families that navigating the transition from school to adult services was a very challenging and stressful experience**

did have a discussion about employment said it occurred after high school around the age of 21 or 22, with the exception of one person who said her family started talking to her about employment at the age of 17. Most of the family members said they didn't really think about it when their child/family member was in high school but in hindsight wish that they had. It was widely acknowledged by families that navigating the transition from school to adult services was a very challenging and stressful experience.

Families were asked if they participated, or would have liked to participate, in their child/family members job exploration process. The majority of parents/family members said they did not, at any point during high school or after, participate in the exploration process but they would have liked to because they felt that they could contribute some helpful information. The types of information they felt would have been helpful included likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, sensory sensitivities, previous experiences, and relevant skills that others may be unaware of. For example, one parent said her son was exceptional at organizing every family members closet – by color, style, size, and accessory type - and took great pride in it because it made everyone so happy. However, her son does not have strong verbal communication and she was never asked for input on his interests but felt that if people

knew his strengths it would be easier for him to get a job that he likes. Other families shared similar examples related to the type of information they felt they could contribute to improving the chances of employment.

## **Other Significant Barriers to Employment**

Transportation, fear of losing benefits, lack of information or education about employment services, co-worker interactions, and safety concerns were all identified as other barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment for people with IDD.

### **Transportation**

People with disabilities have distinct transportation needs that can include physical accessibility, ease of navigation, and sufficient availability.<sup>28</sup> While many people with IDD can access public transportation other people may require more specialized or accessible transportation because of their disability. Paratransit is a service that was established under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which requires public transportation systems to provide comparable service to people with disabilities who are unable, due to their disability, to use the fixed route system.<sup>29</sup> In California the Paratransit system is operated by a mix of public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private companies, but they are primarily regulated by the Local Transit Agency (LTA).

People who require specialized or accessible transportation services through a Paratransit provider reported challenges related to getting to work on time because most of the service providers only offer a “window” of

<sup>28</sup>World Institute on Disability, Transportation, Resilience, Accessibility, and Climate Sustainability, Bay Area Transportation Systems for People with Disabilities: Overview and Analysis (2020) [https://wid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRACS-Transportation-Analysis-2020\\_PDF\\_accessible-final.pdf](https://wid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRACS-Transportation-Analysis-2020_PDF_accessible-final.pdf)

<sup>29</sup>42 U.S. Code § 12143 - Paratransit as a complement to fixed route service

time rather than exact time pick-ups. While most have a 30 minute window policy, meaning that they are considered on time up to 30 minutes after the stated pick up time, many people who use the service report that the wait time is frequently longer than 30 minutes. One of the individuals reported losing a job because they were frequently more than an hour late to work due to an unreliable transportation company. Other challenges with transportation include limited public transportation options depending on where they live or work, limited transportation options for non-traditional hours, and regional center funding limitations for individuals in CIE.

Understanding the complexities of transportation for people with disabilities is beyond the scope of this report. However, it should be noted that there have been several initiatives and regional center rate model updates aimed at improving transportation for people with disabilities in California. The following are a sample of recent programs, policies, and initiatives that are making progress in addressing the transportation crisis for people with disabilities in California:

- DDS Transportation Rate Adjustment – beginning October 1, 2025 an updated vehicle milage rate model adjustment will be implemented based on a rate model review of the original assumptions<sup>30</sup>
- California’s Transportation Companies Network Access for All program established by Senate Bill 1376 in 2018 has made progress in enabling on-demand

transportation services to be more accessible to people who use wheelchairs. They acknowledge more needs to be done to address transportation challenges for people with all types of disabilities and have encouraged next steps to include outreach to include organizations or agencies who are interested in forming partnerships.<sup>31</sup>

- The Metropolitan Transit Commission - a public agency that plans, finances, and coordinates transportation in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area – conducted a comprehensive needs assessment and developed a Coordinated Public Transit – Human Services Transportation Plan (November 2024) in which they provide recommendations for mobility management, funding, transportation access to healthcare, efforts to improve ADA paratransit services, shared and future mobility, equity, infrastructure, and emergency preparedness<sup>32</sup>

## Navigating Benefits and Employment

Understanding and navigating the “Benefits Cliff” can be very challenging and often results in people with IDD who receive SSI or SSDI being afraid to work as they fear losing cash assistance, health care, housing assistance, personal assistance, food assistance, and other essential supports.<sup>33</sup> The complexity of the work rules and understanding how earned income impacts their benefits can be a significant barrier

<sup>30</sup>Department of Developmental Services, August 2025 Rate Reform Update: Transportation Company [https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Transportation\\_Update\\_20250812.pdf](https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Transportation_Update_20250812.pdf)

<sup>31</sup>Seamless Bay Area, California’s Access for All Program: Expanding On-Demand Services for People with IDD <https://www.seamlessbayarea.org/blog/2025/9/24/californias-access-for-all-program-expanding-on-demand-services-for-people-with-disabilities>

<sup>32</sup>Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, November 2024 <https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-12/MTC-Coordinated-Plan-2024.pdf.pdf?cb=85943f94>

<sup>33</sup>Removing Barriers and Disincentives to Meaningful Employment for People with Disabilities Receiving Social Security Benefits [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/topics/date/social\\_security\\_reform\\_recommendations-nfb\\_nib\\_sa\\_task\\_4-19-16.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/topics/date/social_security_reform_recommendations-nfb_nib_sa_task_4-19-16.pdf)



for people causing them to limit or decline employment opportunities. Individuals and families shared several examples of losing their benefits, being misclassified by the Social Security Administration, and being subject to harsh debt collection for either accurate or inaccurate claims of overpayment. The following are some of the experiences shared by individuals and families who participated in the roundtable discussions:

- I was hired to work part-time (12-15 hours a week) for 3 months and I reported my income like I was supposed to and I also reported when I stopped working. A few months later I got a notice that I was going to lose my medical benefits and that was scary because I was scheduled for surgery the next week. I had to get help from my support person to go to the Social Security office and wait for many hours to get help there. I thought it was fixed but then I got another letter saying the same thing so had to go again. I don't think I want to work again.

- I don't know what happened but I got a letter from Social Security that my benefits would be cut off until I pay the money that I owe but I didn't even know I owed any money. They said I owed it from a few years ago but they were behind so now I have to pay it. I have always been good about turning in my hours and I can't survive without SSI.
- I have a degree and want to work but because the nature of my disability I need total physical care – help getting out of bed, getting dressed, eating, literally everything. I know if I get a job I can earn enough to offset the cash benefit I get but I don't think I can ever earn enough to pay for the personal assistants that I need, or my medical care, or housing, there is just so much I can earn compared to the needs I have. It makes me so mad that I have to limit myself and my opportunities just because I have a disability. I have a lot to offer but also I will never not need extra help.

## Lack of Information About Employment Services

Engaging families in employment for people with IDD is essential as they often take on support roles in preparing for employment, providing transportation, advice, coaching, and help organizing work schedules. Yet, many families feel frustrated by the lack of information and/or limited progress in obtaining employment supports.<sup>34</sup> The same was true for many of the individuals and family members that participated in the roundtables as they said they didn't know who to ask or where to go to find out information about employment support or how to get a job. Further, only two individuals knew about the Paid Internship Program and though they

<sup>34</sup>Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2020) Vol. 58, No. 4, *Engaging Families in Employment: Individuals and Families' Retrospective Transition Experiences with Employment Services*

expressed interest they were unaware of how to pursue it. One family shared that they didn't think they could get employment support because their son was deemed ineligible for DOR services so they just assumed that meant that he would never be able to work.

Families and individuals who were aware of employment services identified limited or no availability (provider waitlists) of programs to provide pre-employment (i.e. job exploration, skill building, or work-based learning) or employment services as a challenge for gaining employment skills or obtaining employment support services. All of the roundtable participants placed a high value on work and felt that it was an important part of their lives for the following reasons:

- Earning money is important to pay bills and live in the community
- Pride in doing a good job
- Self-worth and sense of purpose
- Proud to be able to contribute and help family with bills
- Improve and develop skills
- Better social life and more friends

## Safety

All the family members agreed that working is important but some also shared concerns about their family member working and whether they would be safe getting to and from work, use equipment at work safely, and manage their own boundaries with co-workers. Navigating public transportation routes and other passengers were the main concerns families shared related to getting to and from work. Concerns about safe practices at work were also discussed by family members and recognized as one of the

main reasons their family member needed a job coach. Examples of concerns related to workplace safety included using fryers in food services, warehouse safety around fork-lifts and heavy equipment, and proper handling of cleaning chemicals. The issues of personal boundaries was also a concern for parents/family members because they worry that their family member may be too trusting, easily misled, or manipulated by co-workers or other people in the work environment.

## Co-Worker, Supervisor, and Employer Interactions

Positive co-worker interactions can be key to successful employment but many family members worry about whether the co-workers will accept the individual and create a supportive work environment. They also felt that successful employment hinged on whether or not the employer or supervisor understands the individual's disability and is willing to make accommodations. The concerns shared by families included fear that some employers and/or co-workers may not understand certain behaviors like vocalizations, rocking, pacing, or hand flapping and see it as disruptive to the work environment.

## Integrating Mental Health Support

There is growing recognition that people with IDD who have co-occurring mental health conditions need access to timely and effective mental health care as it is common for people with disabilities to experience diagnostic overshadowing. Diagnostic overshadowing occurs when clinicians attribute clinical concerns to the person's

disability rather than a secondary mental health condition.<sup>35</sup> Individuals with IDD who have co-occurring mental health conditions face significant barriers when trying to access employment supports because few job coaches have the necessary education and experience required to support the mental health needs of the individual. Several family members shared concerns related to their family member being able to sustain employment if their mental health conditions interfere with their ability to go to work. Further, individuals who reported struggling with anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder said they have experienced challenges maintaining employment in the past because they have a hard time managing their mental health.

## Opportunities to Improve Employment for IDD

Family members and individuals all said improving employment opportunities for people with IDD should be a priority for the state and Regional Centers. They had several suggestions and strategies that they felt could make a significant impact on increasing employment opportunities as well as long-term employment for people with IDD which included:

- Develop employer preparation programs that include employers and people with disabilities
- Fund transportation for work when people don't have a reliable way to get to work
- Develop better and ongoing training for job coaches
- Make benefits counseling available to anyone who has a job or wants a job

- Develop partnerships with corporations to support employment
- Work with parents, parent groups, and the education system to introduce the idea of employment for students with disabilities well before they are leaving high school
- Share Information about Paid Internship Program with families at transition fairs, conferences, and other public events
- Provide ongoing training to regional center service coordinators so they are informed about all the different employment options for people

## Regional Center Employment Specialists

Regional Centers are private, non-profit organizations that contract with the Department of Developmental Services to coordinate services for individuals with IDD in California. There is a network of 21 Regional Centers throughout the state that serve as a local point of contact for children and adults with IDD and their families. Individuals who qualify for regional center services are assigned a service coordinator to assist them with coordinating the services identified in their Individual Program Plan (IPP). Employment services are among the many services that regional centers help coordinate. Each of the regional centers have an Employment Specialist that supports employment services in a variety of ways depending on the Regional Center.

Roundtable discussions were held with Employment Specialists to learn from their

<sup>35</sup>American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2020) Vol. 125 No. 1, *Associated Risk Factors for Depression and Anxiety in Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Five Year Follow Up*

## Employment Specialists across the state agreed that they would like to see an increase in the number of PIPs that result in CIE.

perspective what can be done to increase employment opportunities as well as what they believe to be challenges or barrier to employment for people with IDD. Employment Specialists often act as a liaison between the regional center and employment services vendors as they provide mandatory vendor trainings, paid internship program orientations, and service coordinator training. They also reported conducting and participating in transition fairs, providing support for resource development, and working with the community, individuals, and families to promote and implement the state's Employment First Policy.

Some regional centers have established relationships with employers in their community in which the employer will reach out to the regional center when they have an employment opportunity to see if they have someone who might be a good fit for the job. In those instances the Employment Specialists said they routinely engage with those employers and supported employment providers to support placing individuals in a PIP or CIE placement. However, it is much more common that employer engagement and job development is done at the provider (vendor) level.

The Employment Specialists that provide training and oversee the PIP programs work closely with the supported employment providers to provide information and approve the PIP requests. They feel that the PIP is a good opportunity for individuals to gain work experience or move into CIE, however

they also report that more work needs to be done to increase a broader understanding of the intent of the PIP and ultimately increase CIE. Employment Specialists across the state agreed that they would like to see an increase in the number of PIPs that result in CIE. In addition to working with supported employment providers many of the Employment Specialists said they also provide training to service coordinators specific to the PIP, person centered approaches to employment, customized employment, and both group and individual supported employment.

Some of the challenges or barriers identified by the Employment Specialists include employer of record issues, employers using the PIP without really intending to hire, and documentation delays that impact the approval process. Employer of record issues come up when the prospective employer agrees to the internship but has not hired and/or onboarded the individual as an employee and does not intend to unless they decide to hire them after the internship is over. The Employment Specialists confirmed that the majority of supported employment providers they work with do not want to be the employer of record so there is a significant need to develop and vendor additional Financial Management Services (FMS) who can provide employer of record services.

The California Blueprint for Competitive Integrated Employment was an initiative created in 2014 by the Department of Education (CDE), the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), and the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to improve coordination and collaboration between the department to advance CIE for people with IDD in California.<sup>36</sup> The Blueprint was to be implemented over a five year period with

<sup>36</sup>California Health and Human Services Agency, California Competitive Integrated Employment Blueprint <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/cie/>

Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) that outlined the commitments at the state and local levels. One of the requirements set forth in the Blueprint was the development of at least 13 Local Partnership Agreements (LPAs) within the first year of implementation. An LPA is an agreement between Local Education Agencies (LEA), DOR District Offices, and Regional Centers to work with the workforce development systems, key partners and other stakeholders to expand CIE opportunities for people with IDD at the local level.

The majority of Employment Specialist felt the LPAs were very important and effective at elevating CIE within the regional center catchment areas, providing resources, and spurring innovation. However, they also noted that COVID really slowed down the LPAs and many did not get to realize their full potential. In some areas where there were strong LPAs there was a marked increase in employment but the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of the implementation period halted much of the progress that was being made. Several of the Employment Specialist said there are still some very active LPAs that are doing really good work but many of the LPAs dissolved or became inactive once the MOU expired and there was no longer a mandate to attend.

Employment Specialists were asked what policy changes could be made to increase employment opportunities for people with IDD in California. The following are policy changes that they felt could make a significant difference and increase employment for people with IDD in California:

- Create flexibilities in the employment service codes to allow for a range of supports that can be delivered in different ways depending on the needs of the individual. Flexibilities could include paying for remote job supports when appropriate, funding work related transportation if needed, and creating funding structures

that take into account individuals with higher support needs.

- Fund Job Developer positions that are not tied to a specific individual but rather focused on developing jobs for people within supported employment programs. Funding for that position should account for the high level of business acumen required to develop jobs with a wide range of employers.
- Maintain the CIE incentive payments that were established in 2021 instead of rolling them back to 2016 amounts
- Fund a dedicated Benefits Counselor position for each Regional Center and require benefits counseling as part of the employment process
- Develop a legal advocacy program for individuals who get their benefits, medical coverage, housing assistance, etc. arbitrarily cut as a result of employment
- Work with DOR, CDE, and DDS to re-establish MOUs that created the LPAs

## Conclusion

People with IDD who want to work face significant barriers to employment which has led to deep disparities in the labor market for people with IDD. The roundtable discussions, as well as existing research, identified several barriers to employment including, but not limited to, low levels of employer engagement, limited qualified and well prepared job coaches, restrictive service codes, outdated policies, lack of reliable transportation, fear of losing benefits, and limited education or awareness about existing employment supports.

Deep disparities in the labor market for people with IDD are evident by the low employment rates, wage gaps, number of hours worked,

pigeonholed employment opportunities, and inaccessible work environments. Addressing employment barriers and disparities for people with IDD requires a multi-system coordinated approach, innovative strategies with aligned funding models, and ongoing input from people with IDD, family members, employers, service providers, regional centers, and other stakeholders who work to improve employment for people with IDD. The roundtable participants all shared an interest in improving employment opportunities for people with IDD. They provided several recommendations, based on their own lived experience or experience supporting individuals in their path to employment, that could increase and improve employment opportunities for people with IDD which include:

- Develop opportunities for intentional employer engagement such as employer mentorship programs, annual statewide employment conferences that highlight best practices in inclusive employment and provide ongoing “community conversations” to share resources with employers
- Create flexibilities in the employment service codes that focus on employment outcomes rather than only paying for direct service hours – the flexibilities could include paying for a job coaching model that focuses on building capacity and competency of the employer/co-worker as well as the individual
- Tiered rates for employment supports that account for the harder to place individuals who may have a criminal background, complex behaviors, or intensive support needs
- Fund positions that focus on increasing and maintaining employment such as professional job developers and benefits counselors
- Require benefits counseling whenever someone has an employment goal and periodically once employed
- Develop a legal advocacy program for people to get help when SSA finds (accurately or otherwise) an over-payment occurred
- Incentivize the re-establishment of the Local Partnership Agreements
- Leverage the work of local level public transportation programs to increase access to work related transportation
- Fund work-related transportation when the individual has exhausted all other transportation options
- Host employment roundtables – either virtual or in-person - for individuals and families to questions about employment, the PIP, and self-employment opportunities
- Support coordinated efforts to engage families, when and where appropriate, to be part of the job exploration process

# Acknowledgment

On behalf of the California Policy Center for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, I want to thank Ability Central for funding this important work and prioritizing employment for people with IDD. I also want to thank everyone who participated in the roundtable discussions and interviews as your experience, insight, and perspectives are essential to understanding the challenges and barriers to successful employment. I appreciate your time, thoughtfulness, and innovative solutions aimed at increasing employment for people with IDD in California.

On a personal note, I want to extend my appreciation and gratitude to the editors and team at CPCIDD. Your time, feedback, and contributions were instrumental in strengthening this report and highlighting the work of CPCIDD.

Respectfully,



**Teresa Anderson**  
Executive Director  
CA Policy Center for IDD

## CPCIDD Board Members

**Rachel Michelin, Board President**  
President, CA Retailers Association

**Olwyn Brown, Board Vice President**  
Member of Carpenters Local #713

**Kathy Van Osten, Founder and Board Secretary**  
Partner, MVM Strategy Group

**Chip Robertson, Board Treasurer**  
Co-Managing Director, Warland Investments

**Michael Bernick, Board Member**  
Special Counsel, Duane Morris

**William H. Duncan IV, Board Member**  
President, Sierra College

**Dr. Barbara Firestone, Board Member**  
Founder, The Help Group

**Azucena Garcia, Board Member**  
Disability Advocate and Podcast Host

**Bob Giroux, Board Member**  
Partner, Lang, Hansen, Giroux & Kidane

**Darin Lounds, Board Member**  
Executive Director, Housing Consortium of the East Bay

**Don Perata, Founder and Board Member Emeritus**  
Retired Senate President Pro-Tem

**Dr. Marjorie Solomon, Board Member**  
Associate Director, MIND Institute  
Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Co-Director T:32 Autism Training Research Program

