

EVALUATION OF EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN CONNECTICUT



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Introduction

Public Act 23-137 § 2 directed the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) to evaluate existing employment assistance programs for persons with disabilities, including Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD), as well as:

- (1) recommend financial incentives for businesses to employ a greater number of people with disabilities, and
- (2) recommend a plan to incentivize businesses to provide training programs, offer modified interviews and reserve market-rate, full-time jobs.

Several state agencies, including the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), the Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS), the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), the Department of Administrative Services (DAS), the Department of Revenue Services (DRS), and the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS) were consulted during the development of this report. Many of these agencies also provided data that aided OPM's analysis of existing state employment assistance programs.

OPM also engaged with a variety of stakeholders, including the CT Nonprofit Alliance, the Autism Spectrum Disorder Advisory Council, the CT Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Connecticut Business and Industry Association and various independent businesses to gather additional insights into the services and supports available to individuals with disabilities beyond the information available from executive branch agencies. Findings from research into best practices for promoting the employment of persons with disabilities, as well as alternate employment assistance models implemented in other states were also considered in formation of the recommendations issued pursuant to PA 23-137.

Background

The term ‘disability’ is used to describe a broad range of unique attributes and impairments, including *physical disabilities*, which include impairments to mobility, hearing, eyesight, and other limitations on a person’s physical functioningⁱ; and *cognitive disabilities*, which include limitations in mental functioning, such as difficulty concentrating, speaking, and comprehending information, that lasts six months or more and results in increased difficulty completing mental tasks.ⁱⁱ Included in the *cognitive disabilities* category are *intellectual disability* and *developmental disabilities (IDD)*, which have additional characteristics that do not apply to all individuals with cognitive disabilities.¹ For example, while autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is classified as a cognitive disability, a person with autism is only considered to have an intellectual disability if their IQ is 69 or below.ⁱⁱⁱ Developmental disabilities include those with physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or both, with the distinguishing characteristic being that the disability either presents at birth or manifests during an individual’s development prior to the age of 22.^{iv} As of 2021, an estimated 406,000 of the approximately 3.6 million people living in Connecticut had a disability (11.4%).^v In the same year, people with disabilities made up approximately 10% of the working age (16-64) population in the state, and individuals with cognitive disabilities, specifically, make up an estimated 5% of the state’s working age population.^{vi}

Individuals with disabilities in the United States have long faced more substantial barriers to employment than job seekers without disabilities. The latest American Community Survey data produced by the United States Census Bureau demonstrate that, in 2023, the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities in Connecticut (9.4%) was 5.2 percentage points higher than the unemployment rate for individuals without disabilities (4.2%). By comparison, the nationwide unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 9.3%, and the rate was 3.8% for those without disabilities.^{vii} Those with cognitive disabilities are particularly limited in their ability to obtain and maintain employment, despite increasing awareness regarding the importance of workplace disability inclusion and the availability of public resources to support employing these individuals. In 2023, individuals with cognitive disabilities experienced an unemployment rate of 15.2% in

¹ Connecticut General Statutes § 1-1g defines *intellectual disability* as a “significant limitation in intellectual functioning,” measured by an intelligence quotient (IQ) that is more than two standard deviations below the mean (scored by a licensed psychologist), existing concurrently with adaptive behavior skill deficits. To be considered an *intellectual disability*, both criteria must have been present prior to age 18.

Connecticut and 12.6% across the United States.² Notably, unemployment rates exclude individuals who are unemployed because they are not seeking employment. These rates also do not include those who are working part time but want to work full time or those who are not seeking employment because they have been discouraged by poor job search or work experiences in the past. Because individuals with disabilities are more likely to cease their job search due to discrimination and various other unique obstacles that they face during the hiring process compared to job seekers without disabilities, it is likely that many individuals with disabilities who want to work are not captured in these unemployment rates since they are not currently considered labor force participants.

Employment Types

Employment for individuals with disabilities is categorized in several ways based on the individuals' support needs and the setting in which they work. The optimal form of employment for this population, *competitive integrated employment* (CIE), is commonly cited by experts as the model that promotes the greatest inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workplace and yields the most positive economic outcomes for these employees. Through CIE, individuals with disabilities work alongside workers without disabilities, are paid the prevailing wage for their labor, and work largely independently without a job coach or other formal support. These employees perform similar duties, receive the same benefits and training, and are presented equal opportunities for advancement as their coworkers without disabilities in comparable positions.^{viii}

Because CIE may not be attainable or appropriate for every individual, DDS provides individualized support to help job seekers achieve employment with a level of support that best meets their needs through *individualized supported employment* (ISE) and *customized employment* (CE) opportunities. These options often involve greater assistance throughout the job search, application, and training processes and provide unique support to individuals to engage with the employment modality most suitable for them. Individuals who are unable to work independently or require greater levels of support than are available under CIE often engage in *group supported employment* (GSE). GSE is an employment model in which employment services recipients work alongside other individuals with disabilities under the supervision of a permanent job coach rather than working in a fully integrated setting among employees without disabilities. In some cases, ISE, CE, and GSE may be effective means of gradually reducing individuals' reliance on supports and transitioning them into CIE.^{ix}

² Note that current labor force participation data are not available for the IDD population; however, most intellectual and developmental disabilities are encompassed in the classification of cognitive disability.

Connecticut is also one of 37 states that currently permits employers to apply for a waiver under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which would allow them to compensate employees with disabilities at a rate below the minimum wage.^x These subminimum wages, also referred to as commensurate wages, are based on an individual worker's productivity compared to the productivity of a worker without a disability performing the same or similar tasks. This program was designed to allow people with disabilities to become employed in jobs for which they would not otherwise be hired if they were required to be paid the minimum wage.^{xi} Due in part to greater prioritization of CIE opportunities for people with disabilities over alternative employment models, though, 14(c) waiver utilization has decreased significantly in recent years.^{xii}

Barriers to Employment

National research suggests that the most common barriers that an individual with a disability may face include recruitment- or workforce-related discrimination, lack of transportation, unavailability of supports and services, accessibility and mobility challenges, insufficient training, and fear of losing public benefits following a change in their employment status.^{xiii} However, because academic literature and available data commonly refer to “disabilities” broadly, existing information is not sufficient to estimate the percentage of people with IDD or autism, specifically, that are not employed, or the barriers that are most commonly faced by such individuals. Findings from the 2022-2023 National Core Indicators (NCI)-IDD survey³ showed that while 98% of survey respondents in Connecticut had a reliable means of travelling to work, appointments, and other community centers, 16% reported needing further assistance to find more reliable transportation. In addition, 24% reported needing help developing job skills and 23% needed help finding or signing up for classes.^{xiv} Historical research has also suggested that the prevalence of hiring discrimination against individuals with disabilities stems from concerns about these applicants' qualifications, accommodation needs and associated costs, and the discomfort of existing employees without disabilities.^{xv} Limitations in the barriers selected for inclusion in existing research, however, suggest a need for more comprehensive data on employment outcomes and obstacles for people with IDD and other disabilities in Connecticut.

Connecticut is also experiencing a workforce shortage which has limited the availability of high-quality employment support staff for individuals with disabilities in the state. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the CT Nonprofit Alliance, nonprofit providers in the state faced an average vacancy rate of more than 16% in 2022, which represented a 9%

³ This survey was exclusive to adults with disabilities who were receiving case management services and at least one paid service from their state of residence.

increase since 2019. Further, due to challenges related to attracting and retaining qualified staff, 55% of these provider groups reported operating a waiting list for services, including employment and day supports for individuals with IDD.^{xvi} These challenges are consistent with those experienced across the United States, where 61% of providers nationwide had staffing shortages as of June 2024 and 37% lacked the capacity to serve additional vocational rehabilitation clients, according to a survey conducted by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation.^{xvii} Such workforce shortages may impede the ability of individuals with IDD to access on-site job coaching, limiting the employment opportunities available to them and their ability to adapt to and succeed in new jobs.

Independent of this study, pursuant to PA 23-137, the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS) and the Department of Transportation (DOT) are charged with conducting studies that will feature, respectively, recommendations for addressing the state's health and human services workforce shortage and the transportation needs of people with IDD.

Spillover Effects from Unemployment

In addition to being disproportionately underemployed, individuals with disabilities are also far more likely to live in poverty than those without. In Connecticut, an estimated 21.5% of people with disabilities, including 26.6% of individuals with IDD, live below the poverty line compared to 8.3% of people without disabilities.^{xviii} Experts commonly cite an inability to secure and maintain employment, particularly CIE, and the precarious part-time work most often available to the disabled community, as some of the primary drivers of economic instability for individuals with disabilities. Employment for individuals with disabilities has also been shown to contribute to positive health outcomes, including better physical health, reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, improved self-esteem and general mental wellbeing, and higher perceived overall quality of life, especially among individuals working in inclusive settings and with greater autonomy.^{xix} While employment is not suitable or preferable for every individual with a disability, those seeking to work may be prevented from realizing these external benefits without public support to overcome the various barriers that they face.

Supported employment, in which state funding provides access to job coaching and accommodations for an employee with disabilities working in a CIE setting, has also been shown to produce economic benefits that help improve the self-sufficiency of employment assistance programs. Whereas employment improves the financial wellbeing of individuals with disabilities, the introduction of new taxpayers to the state also generates additional revenue that may be dedicated to expanding supports and services for this population. As more individuals achieve CIE, the magnitude of the current workforce shortage is also reduced, because employers are able to fill more vacancies, and because individuals who

are sufficiently prepared to work independently have less need for extensive ongoing support. Evidence suggests that these outcomes may improve the availability and accessibility of services for individuals with disabilities, allowing for more cost-effective resource allocation without requiring substantial state budget appropriations.^{xx}

Connecticut Agencies Offering Employment Support

In total, there are six state agencies in Connecticut that provide targeted employment supports, services, and resources to individuals with disabilities: ADS, DDS, DOL, DECD, DAS, and DSS. Additionally, within ADS are two distinct offices that provide employment support services to different populations of people with disabilities: the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) and the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB). Of these state entities, BRS and DDS are the most involved in supporting employment for Connecticut residents with IDD, specifically.

A variety of programs are currently offered across state agencies that help job seekers develop their skills and improve their employability, apply and interview for jobs, find work tailored to their needs across industries and modalities, learn and grow in their positions, and reduce the commonly cited barriers to attaining and maintaining long-term employment. Various incentives are also offered by the state, as well as the federal government, to encourage employers to hire greater numbers of candidates with disabilities, as well as enable individuals with disabilities to pursue self-employment. In addition to the assistance offered directly by these state agencies, employment services are supported by the many non-profit providers, municipalities, and community groups that operate in Connecticut.

Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

BRS is a division of ADS, and its primary function is to provide employment assistance to people with disabilities in Connecticut. BRS' Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program assists individuals with significant physical or mental disabilities to prepare for, find, obtain, maintain, and advance in employment.^{xxi} The program's services are both directly provided by and arranged through VR counselors. These VR Counselors coordinate and purchase services from a wide variety of vendors across several areas of specialty. Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) are an integral partner in the Bureau's statewide service delivery model, providing work readiness and employment support services. Other common service categories include on-the-job training, the provision of assistive

technology and medical and durable equipment, higher education, and post-secondary skills-based training and educational programs.

BRS is a central part of the network of federal, state, and local government-funded agencies who provide employment assistance to people with disabilities. The BRS-VR program is a core partner within the CT Workforce System, working in collaboration with various programs administered by the Connecticut Department of Labor, the State Department of Education, and programs mandated by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Additional critical partnerships include, but are not limited to, Connecticut's Regional Workforce Development Boards, BESB, DMHAS, and DSS. BRS also collaborates extensively with DDS on initiatives that specifically seek to extend support to individuals with intellectual disability. The VR program is primarily federally funded by an annual grant through the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), which has a required state-appropriated match. The combination of state funds and federal dollars total approximately \$30 million annually. Annual funding fluctuates, however, as BRS routinely pursues opportunities to obtain federal funds relinquished by other State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies at the conclusion of each federal fiscal year.

In facilitating employment for an individual with disabilities, VR counselors work with job seekers to create and implement an Individualized Plan of Employment (IPE). The IPE is a significant component of the VR program, providing a foundation for the services and employment planning provided to each individual. Most individuals work with VR counselors to create an IPE, and receive services based upon that plan.^{xxii} An IPE is comprised of (i) a description of the specific desired employment outcome that the individual has chosen, which, "to the maximum extent appropriate," will result in competitive integrated employment (CIE)^{xxiii}; (ii) a list of the specific VR services, such as assistive technologies, training, and on-the-job supports that are needed to achieve that employment outcome; (iii) a timeline for the achievement of the desired employment outcome; (iv) the organization, which is often a community rehabilitation provider (CRP), chosen to provide the services and the methods used to procure services; (v) the terms and conditions that stipulate the responsibilities of the individual, BRS' VR counselor, and other organizations providing services; and (vi) a statement of the projected need for post-employment services and a plan for obtaining extended employment supports upon the completion of the plan if needed. These components ensure that the IPE provides a clear and comprehensive roadmap to employment for job seekers.

To support individuals as they work through their IPE, the VR program provides an extensive range of services. VR is a comprehensive program in which job seekers receive

individualized support for all aspects of the employment process from planning to placement to extended support. In some cases, VR also provides funding for transportation, necessary home and workplace modifications, rehabilitation technology, and vehicle modifications, if such measures are integral to the individual's IPE and necessary for their ability to obtain and maintain employment.

The tables below illustrate trends in the VR program over the past decade. Notably, the passage of WIOA, which took effect on July 1, 2015, necessitated various reporting changes beginning in FFY 2016. Prior to WIOA, high school students receiving pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) were counted toward the agency's total number of VR applicants, whereas these students are now counted in a distinct category.

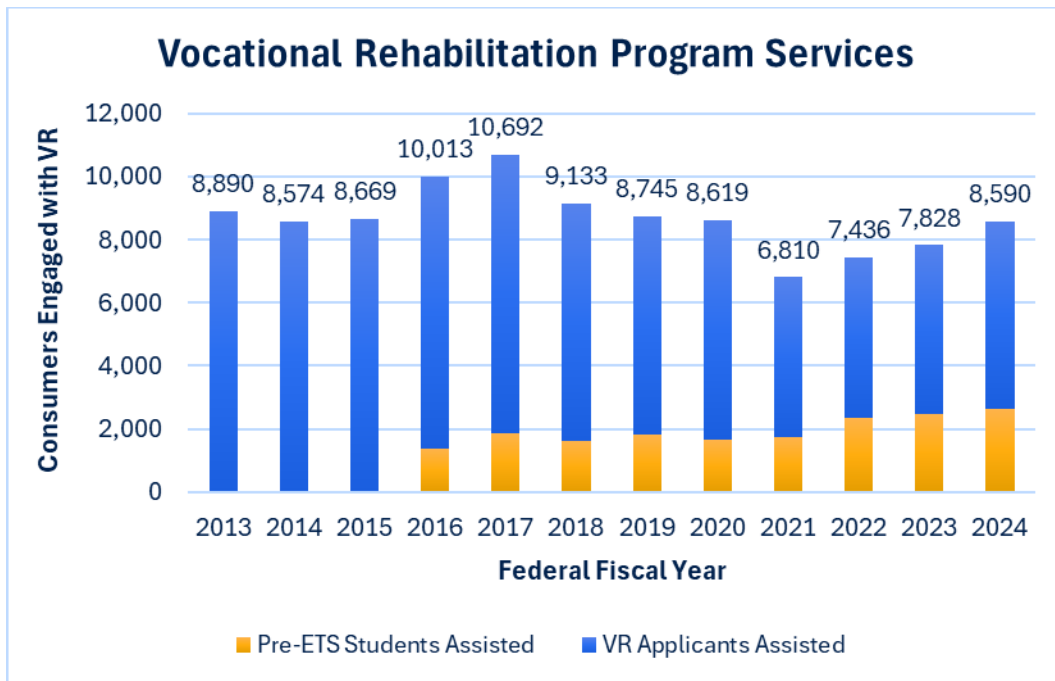


Figure 1.1. Source: Information provided by BRS and obtained from Yearly Digests of Administrative Reports to the Governor from the Department of Aging and Disability Services and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services from FFY 2013-2023.^{xxiv}

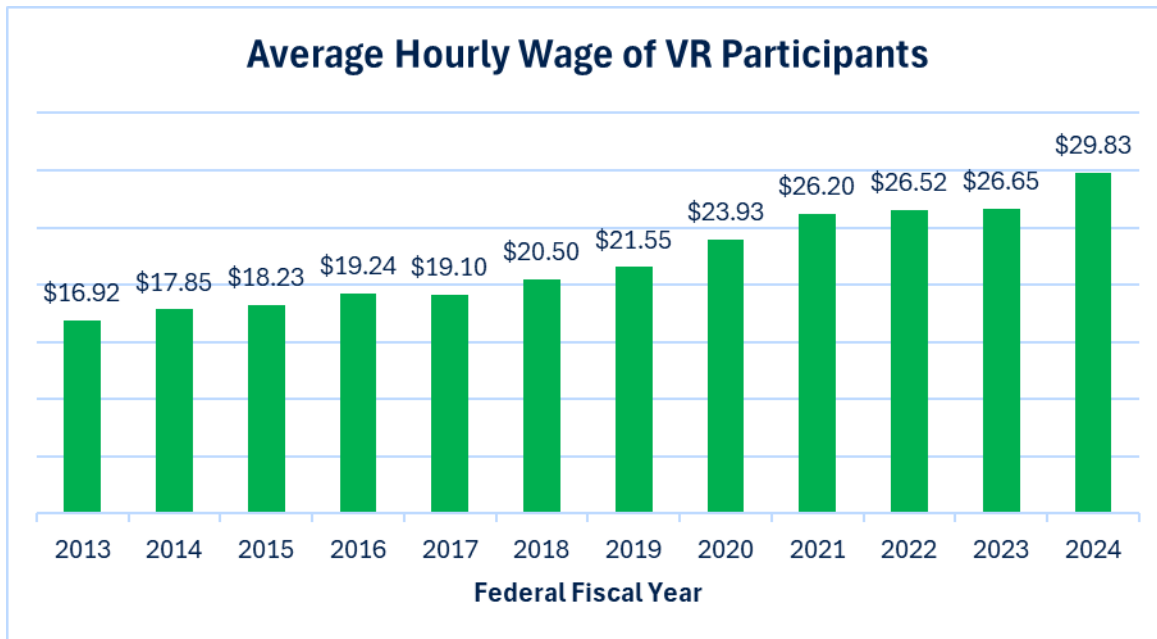


Figure 1.2 Source: *Ibid.*

A variety of factors may account for the decline in VR program usage in recent years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restricted ability to facilitate employment prompted BRS to transition to virtual services for the VR program, which allowed the agency to continue providing employment services on a modified scale. Today, the VR program provides services both in-person and virtually, which allows for increased efficiency and access to program participants. Since 2020, however, CRPs have experienced persistent staffing shortages which, in combination with high internal VR program vacancy rates, have delayed the return to pre-pandemic engagement levels. While there is not currently a waitlist for individuals to enroll in the VR program, BRS reports that individuals have experienced increasingly long wait times to apply for and receive services, as well as gaps in services due to workforce shortages.

In June 2024, there were 11 VR Counselor job openings within BRS, which represents a 16.2% vacancy rate. Once positions are filled, there is a long onboarding process, and it takes new master’s-level staff approximately two years to become proficient in program operations. BRS also has reported a significant decrease in the number of experienced VR Specialist Counselors, from 37 to 23. Due to the inordinately large caseloads experienced during this time, 161 cases were reportedly covered by VR Supervisors and Regional Directors.^{xxv} To address these staffing challenges, BRS recently began to recruit candidates with a bachelor's degree, despite VR Counselor positions historically requiring a relevant master’s degree. Because master’s-level education with specific coursework is required to

meet federal Comprehensive System for Personnel Development standards, BRS intends to leverage federal funds to provide extensive post-inductive training, including providing funding to enable these employees to obtain a master's degree in vocational rehabilitation counseling.^{xxxvi}

For several years prior to 2017, the program's budget had been augmented by federal Reallocation Funds obtained through USDOE and the federal RSA. From the years 2009 through 2024 BRS obtained over \$65M in additional funds through the reallocation process. The availability of these funds was temporarily limited in FFY 2017, necessitating the implementation of an Order of Selection (OOS). An OOS is a managed waitlist that allows VR to prioritize serving individuals with the most significant disabilities, which can be implemented when a VR program either has inadequate funding or staffing capacity to serve all eligible job seekers. Once Reallocation Funds increased again in 2019, BRS worked with USDOE and RSA to end the OOS in 2020. In FFY 2024, BRS had requested \$8.75 million in reallocated FFY 2023 federal funds to support the development of their workforce; however, the agency only received \$2.1 million, prompting them to halt recruitment for 8 of their open VR Counselor positions.

Level Up

WIOA requires that 15% of each state's federal VR grant award be set aside for a defined array of pre-employment transition services. As a means of marketing these services to students and schools BRS has labelled them "Level Up." Level Up is the mechanism by which the VR program "provides students with pre-employment services including tools, training and resources to develop their future potential to work competitively and forge a path to independence."^{xxxvii} The program serves students ages 16-22 who are potentially eligible for VR, including those who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a 504 plan, or any disability.^{xxxviii} Through Level Up, BRS also provides job exploration assistance, counseling for post-secondary pursuits, work-based learning experiences, work-readiness training, and self-advocacy to school-aged youth with disabilities.

The essential objective of this program is to encourage and support eventual CIE for people with disabilities through early intervention. In FFY 2022, 2,337 students with disabilities were served in the Level Up program with 473 students served via community work-based learning experiences (WBLE).^{xxxix} Demand for the program has continued to grow since its initiation in FFY 2016, with 2,627 students receiving Level Up services and 627 engaging in WBLE in FFY 2024.^{xxx} Although Level Up is available to all potentially VR-eligible students, to receive the rest of the services on the VR Continuum after leaving the school system, such as vocational training or job placement services, one must be approved for VR services with BRS.^{xxxi}

CT PIE

CT Pathways to Integrated Employment (CT PIE) is an initiative that helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities achieve CIE. This exclusive focus on people with IDD, as opposed to disabilities in general, is unique amongst BRS programs. This program is administered by BRS in partnership with DDS, as individuals must be eligible for DDS services in order to participate.^{xxxii} The program offers a pathway to work through specialized services that are tailored to a person's unique skills, interests, and needs, similar to the IPE development process in the VR program. The goal of CT PIE is to expand the capacity of VR and other state systems to guide people with IDD toward CIE and away from subminimum wage employment, primarily by assisting participants in obtaining and maintaining employment in green jobs, transportation, and other essential services. To administer the program, BRS will partner with CRPs, assistive technology centers, independent living centers, and a host of other potential entities. BRS is also contracting with the University of Maryland for technical assistance and evaluation.

The project is in its initial phases and data regarding the implementation of this program is not yet available. CT PIE is funded by a federal model demonstration grant, the purpose of which is to help determine whether this method of expansion of VR services to people with IDD is effective and feasible. This federal grant provides \$13.9 million to fund CT PIE from October 2022 through September 2027. Although only 94 individuals are currently enrolled, the program has the capacity to serve 500 people with IDD over the course of its 5-year program period. In FFY 2025 CT PIE anticipates enrolling 204 individuals. BRS aims to enroll 114 adults with 46 obtaining CIE and 356 youth with 214 obtaining CIE in CT PIE by the program's conclusion.^{xxxiii}

BRIDGE CT

BRIDGE CT is currently being implemented with a \$10 million five-year U.S. Department of Education Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) grant that was awarded in October 2023. BRIDGE CT aims to support children (ages 10-13) and youth (ages 14-24) with disabilities through innovative activities aimed at fostering independent living, self-advocacy, and CIE in high-demand career pathways across the state. This initiative takes a systemic approach to transition services by partnering with the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Centers for Independent Living (CILs), and Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Building on existing infrastructure, BRIDGE CT integrates career exploration, planning, preparation, training, and hands-on opportunities tailored to align with Connecticut's workforce needs. Like Level Up, the initiative places a strong focus on early engagement, particularly for underserved populations, to improve the effectiveness of interventions and enhance employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.^{xxxiv}

Underserved populations that will be targeted for program participation will include racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged individuals, individuals in foster care or displaced individuals, English language learners, and justice-involved youth. The formation of a state-level Interagency Advisory Workgroup and three Regional Interagency Teams will help design, implement, and refine BRIDGE CT to ensure that participants make informed decisions about their transition services and ultimately achieve CIE.^{xxxv}

Additionally, BRIDGE CT will establish a dedicated website offering age-appropriate materials for youth participants, resources for professionals, and project information, raising awareness among public and business stakeholders. The University of Maryland's Center for Transition and Career Innovation will provide technical assistance and conduct a comprehensive evaluation of BRIDGE CT, measuring its impacts at the systems, services, and individual levels. The results of this evaluation will be shared with local, state, and national partners, contributing to the continuous development of successful transition models that lead to CIE opportunities both within Connecticut and across the country.^{xxxvi}

Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities Equitable Transition Model Demonstration (ETM)

The CT Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities Equitable Transition Model Demonstration is a \$17.4 million grant that was awarded to CTDOL by the USDOL's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) on April 1, 2024. Connecticut was one of five states to receive this grant from the federal government.^{xxxvii} This program is designed to serve youth ages 14 to 24 with disabilities who face additional significant disadvantages, such as living in low-income communities, experiencing homelessness, being involved in the criminal legal system, leaving foster care, or otherwise being identified by the WIOA Plan as multiply marginalized.^{xxxviii} The program will assist transition-age youth with disabilities in attaining CIE by educating them about career pathways and providing dedicated job developers and peer mentors. The ETM grant also seeks to “build a collaborative infrastructure for CIE, work-based learning, and career pathways.”

This collaborative infrastructure will include the five WDBs, CTDOL, and BRS. Additionally, the ETM program plans to employ innovative techniques to serve individuals, including piloting the use of virtual reality goggles for career training purposes within WDBs. The program will build upon and collaborate with existing programs that target youth with disabilities, including Level Up and WIOA Youth.

In recent years, an estimated 119,000 14- to 26-year-olds in Connecticut either dropped out of school, were at risk of dropping out, or were unemployed between 2021-2022.^{xxxix} Accordingly, this grant focuses on underserved populations, given the disproportionate rate

of people with disabilities who come from low-income communities or are incarcerated. Those who are exiting high school and already receiving transition services from BRS are the primary targets for service. The goals of ETM are to serve at least 110 students a year, with 45% of participants commencing post-secondary education and approximately 50% of participants obtaining and maintaining CIE for at least one year.^{xi}

Trial Program

The Trial Program at BRS allows businesses to conduct short employment trials for evaluating the work of people with disabilities who are being considered for longer-term employment. There are two types of trial programs: the Trial Work Experience (TWE) and the Competitive Placement Opportunity (CPO). A TWE provides a job seeker with the opportunity to learn about and gain experience with a job for 20-40 hours in total. CPOs are similar to TWEs but include working interviews in lieu of traditional interviews. Through both programs, employers benefit from the ability to assess job seekers' skills at no cost to the business prior to making formal hiring decisions.^{xii} BRS funds the labor performed throughout the duration of the trial, including costs associated with wages and workers' compensation, guaranteeing that program participants are compensated at minimum wage for their work.

In 2023, the VR Trial Program provided a total of 190 CPOs for 130 individuals. In the same year, 67 people were hired and maintained employment, meaning that 52% of all individuals who had a CPO during the year successfully reached the 90-day retention period. Between TWEs and CPOs, the VR program partnered with 209 businesses to provide trial programs and other services during the year.^{xiii}

Two foundational principles of this program are worth highlighting: (i) the opportunity for an individual with disabilities to try out a job to assess their level of interest, aptitude, and comfort is helpful for determining their ability to succeed in a given work environment; and (ii) some people with disabilities are better able to display their skill sets and strengths to an employer in a work setting than they would in a standard interview. The goal of this approach is to increase the employment of people with disabilities by removing some of the structural barriers inherent in traditional hiring processes. A 2020 study published in the international journal, *Autism*, noted that, "A major barrier to obtaining employment is the initial interview process, which requires social presentation and impression management (IM) skills that autistic people often find challenging."^{xiiii} Funding for this program, as with all VR services, is allocated based on demand. Trial programs offer a promising avenue through which people with disabilities may find employment while circumventing the traditional, often restrictive, hiring process.

Industry Specific Training and Placement Programs

Another component of the VR program is the Industry Specific Training and Placement Program (ISTPP), which responds to the needs of businesses by creating a customized plan that utilizes Universal Design to identify which skills, knowledge bases, and abilities are important for their employees to possess.^{xliv} After a business determines which positions they most need to fill, BRS creates a customized plan and training curriculum that adheres to the standards set by the business. ISTPPs include both on-the-job and classroom-based training. The program is implemented by BRS, as well as one of the two CRPs approved to provide ISTPP services, in accordance with the plan tailored to a business. By understanding and accommodating industry needs, this program creates new competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

In 2023, the VR program provided ISTPPs for 94 individuals at seven different businesses. Across the state, ISTPPs have been created and are currently offered at Mohegan Sun, Wyndham Hotel, Walgreens Distribution Center, Advance Auto Parts Distribution Center, Walgreens Retail, CVS Retail and Pharmacy, and Travelers. Of the 94 job seekers participating in ISTPPs, 20 were ultimately hired.^{xlv}

On-the-Job Training

On-the-job (OTJ) training allows businesses to be reimbursed for the one-on-one time spent training an employee with disabilities. One such initiative administered by BRS is the On-the-Job Training program, in which the VR program contracts directly with an employer and pays them to train an individual for a specific job. BRS also offers a Paid Internship reimbursement service in which the VR program repays the host business 130% of the wages paid to a new employee during the agreed upon training period. This program operates under a similar premise to the trial programs in which financial incentives are offered to encourage the employment and training of people with disabilities. In 2023, 32 OTJ trainings and 88 paid internships were provided to VR program participants.^{xlvi}

Wage Reimbursement

BRS promotes the fact that they may provide wage reimbursement to employers who provide job experiences and/or employment to participants in several BRS programs, including trial programs, on-the-job training and paid internships. This allows a business to train an employee with disabilities without incurring costs for wages and related HR expenses during the training period. 130% of the wages paid by businesses to new employees for the duration of the employee's training period are reimbursable through BRS. The reimbursable training period may last anywhere between one and three months depending on the job duties, training objectives, transferable skills of the candidate, and

the length of the onboarding process. The training period timeline must also be agreed on by all parties, including the employee, the business, and BRS. In total, approximately 36% of people enrolled in VR in 2023 received some type of wage reimbursement.^{xlvii}

Employment Opportunities Program (EOP)

The Employment Opportunities Program (EOP) provides funding for long term supports, such as job coaching, to individuals with significant disabilities to assist them in maintaining employment where no other funding for extended services is available. This program is established in Connecticut General Statutes §17a-798 with the stated purpose of enabling people with the most significant disabilities to obtain and maintain CIE.^{xlviii} To provide long-term supports, BRS contracts with CRPs to offer job coaching or other extended supports on an hourly basis, though some flexibility exists to fund alternative service providers in unique situations.

The program served 132 people in state fiscal year 2023 and currently has a \$300,000 annual state funding cap.^{xlix} However, following a reduction in program participation in recent years, BRS has been able to provide additional supports for individuals who need them beyond what is typically available. Although there is currently no waitlist and projected demand for the current fiscal year is estimated to represent approximately \$225,000 (75%) of the program's operating budget, BRS projects that EOP service demand will gradually return to previously observed levels over the coming years.^l

Supported Employment (SE)

The BRS SE program provides additional supports that an individual with disabilities may need to maintain employment after obtaining a job through VR. The program has access to \$255,000 in annualized federal grant money that can be expended to support individuals with disabilities following the completion of their IPE.^{li} 50% of this funding is required to be used to support youth below the age of 25 and is subject to a 10% non-federal match requirement. These supports are provided by CRPs with whom BRS contracts and offers job coaching to support program participants during their transition to employer or alternatively-funded supports for maintaining employment.

As of October 2024, BRS was supporting 206 individuals with SE IPEs. Of these 206 individuals, 102 were youth below the age of 25. These numbers represent a 100% overall increase from Fiscal Year 2023 when BRS had 103 SE IPEs, and of these IPEs, only 28 were youth. In Fiscal Year 2024, BRS spent \$48,538 on SE job coaching services, of which \$17,768 was specifically expended for youth services.^{lii}

Windmills Disability Awareness Program

BRS also provides customizable disability awareness training to businesses and community partners through the Windmills Disability Awareness Training program. Windmills trainings are designed to improve workplace disability inclusion by employing experts to guide disability-related discussions in an open forum. The voluntary trainings are tailored to the participants' needs and use interactive exercises to promote comprehension related to identifying emotions, stereotypes, and attitudinal barriers that may make them less effective as managers when dealing with persons with disabilities.^{liii} Administered at no cost to participants, Windmills is an effective resource for improving employers' perceptions of employees with disabilities in the workplace and provides essential tools and skills for pursuing their inclusive hiring and retention goals.

Bureau of Education and Services to the Blind

Vocational Rehabilitation

BESB, another division of ADS, is primarily responsible for the coordination and provision of services to all Connecticut residents who are legally blind or who have significant visual impairments. The agency maintains a confidential registry of people who are legally blind in the state and provides comprehensive independent living services, adaptive aids and devices, and employment assistance services to individuals of all ages. Through their various services, BESB seeks to maximize the independence and community inclusion of people with visual impairments. BESB's target population does not include individuals with other disabilities, such as IDD, unless they also are legally blind or have significant visual impairments.

BESB's VR program, which is comparable in scope to the VR services offered by BRS, provides school-to-work transition services to youth and helps adults achieve and succeed in employment.^{liv} Working in partnership with the American Job Centers program administered by the CT Department of Labor (CTDOL) and other collaborators, BESB provides a range of skill building programs, funding opportunities, counseling, and other resources that can support people who are blind in achieving their employment goals. BESB further strives to increase employment for individuals with disabilities by providing technical assistance and candidate referral services to employers across the state.^{lv} Job seekers are active participants in the development of career goals and in the identification of services and providers that will contribute toward achieving, maintaining and advancing in employment.^{lvi} Funding is also available within the VR program to be used for

postsecondary education, such as trade school or community college, which enables individuals to obtain the necessary credentials to pursue employment in a specific field.^{lvii}

During FY 2023, 722 job seekers received support through BESB's VR program. Of these program participants, 714 were served under an IPE and 97 achieved employment. The average hourly wage for these individuals was \$25.19.^{lviii} Data suggest that participation has fallen in recent years and while the number of people achieving employment through the program has also decreased, the share of those served who achieved employment reached its highest point in recent years in FY 2023. BESB VR participants also experienced wage growth that frequently outpaced inflation between 2013 and 2023, with an average annual increase of approximately 4% reported during the period.^{lix} By comparison, the average annual inflation rate during this time was 2.7%.^{lx}

Department of Developmental Services

DDS is the primary agency serving people with IDD in Connecticut. To be eligible for DDS services, one must either have an intellectual disability (as defined in CGS § 1-1g) or be diagnosed with the neurobehavioral genetic disorder Prader-Willi Syndrome (PWS) by a physician.^{lxi} While DDS serves individuals with IDD exclusively, facilitation of employment for this population is not the agency's primary function. Beyond employment support, DDS provides residential and day services. As of December 2023, DDS had 17,337 individuals active within the agency.^{lxii} Of that total, 11,434 were receiving annualized funding for services and were working with a case manager. Most DDS services are delivered through agency's network of approximately 350 qualified providers, 143 of which contract with DDS to provide employment services.^{lxiii} DDS' employment and day services are provided via three 1915(c) waivers to the Medicaid State Plan. These waiver services are funded by a state appropriation that is matched by the federal government.

Employment Services

DDS supports individuals seeking employment by working to match them with opportunities that fit their unique goals and needs, which includes prioritizing connecting job seekers with CIE opportunities when possible. Through two pre-employment programs and individual supports offered by DDS, the agency seeks to help individuals with IDD to obtain, maintain, and advance in employment across a variety of modalities, including CIE, individualized supported employment (ISE), customized employment (CE), self-employment and group supported employment (GSE).^{lxiv}

Competitive Integrated Employment

As part of the agency's "Employment First" policy, DDS prioritizes helping job seekers achieve CIE and providing supports necessary for maintaining such employment.^{lxv} Individuals who participate in CIE generally require fewer supports from DDS and are often able to utilize the DDS helpline as an alternative to consistent communication with a case manager. While CIE participants may not receive an annual budget for obtaining employment and day services, DDS job coaching support may be available to individuals depending on their Level of Need (LON) score. As of December 2023, 260 of the 17,337 individuals who were active with DDS had competitive employment listed as their primary program with an additional 32 people participating in CIE in an auxiliary capacity. In total, 292 people worked in CIE in during the year.^{lxvi} Additionally, 2415 individuals have no day program listed. As of October 2024, DDS is conducting a review of those individuals, as a subset of this group is likely to be competitively employed.^{lxvii}

Individualized Supported Employment

Through ISE, DDS offers more extensive support for individuals with IDD by connecting them with an employment specialist, or job coach, who helps them to find competitive employment through a job discovery process. This process includes assistance provided throughout the job search and application process following a determination of an individual's skills and interests, as well as prolonged support once they begin working. ISE is designed to allow individuals to work with support and training from job coaches while gradually reducing their reliance on support, facilitating more independent employment with potential for a full transition to CIE. ISE is supported by one-time incentives to providers who facilitate the hiring and maintaining of employees with IDD in competitive and integrated positions. 690 individuals had ISE listed as their primary program in the latest DDS report, and 931 total job seekers engaged in ISE in some capacity.^{lxviii}

Customized Employment

CE, an alternative method of obtaining CIE, is more structured than ISE and focuses on matching the specific strengths and skills of an individual with the needs of employers.^{lxix} The goal of CE is to work with businesses to create a customized position that addresses their unmet needs and utilizes the skill set of an individual with IDD.^{lxx} CE services can only be provided by staff with specialized CE certifications, which are distinct from general provider certifications. The process of CE occurs in three stages: analysis of the individual's skills and interests, negotiation with businesses for the creation of a customized position, and the facilitation of follow-up supports by the CE provider. This approach also includes

transitioning individuals to natural job supports once employment has been achieved. As of December 2023, 729 individuals were receiving CE services.^{lxxi}

Group Supported Employment

The most commonly utilized employment program offered by DDS, GSE involves assigning individuals to work with a group of other persons with IDD under the supervision of a permanent job coach. This structure may effectively prepare participants for future engagement with CIE. In 2023, GSE was the primary day program of 2,021 individuals and 2,244 worked in a GSE setting at any point during the year.^{lxxii} Due to both the high number of individuals served and the higher level of supports required, GSE is also more cost-intensive than all other employment programs administered by DDS. In fiscal year 2019, more than \$65 million was expended for GSE operations, which represented an average cost of \$25,094 for each participant. By comparison, less than \$6 million was expended on other DDS employment programs during the same year, with an associated average cost per participant of \$9,093.^{lxxiii}

Individual Day Vocational & Employment Transition Services

Individual Day Vocational (IDV) supports make up one of two pre-employment programs operated by DDS that seek to prepare individuals with IDD for future workforce participation. IDV allows program participants to receive typical day supports with an employment orientation which helps individuals to learn job skills and overcome barriers to obtaining and maintaining a job.^{lxxiv} This program was the primary service for 459 people as of December 2023 and served 601 people in total.^{lxxv}

Similarly, Employment Transition Services (ETS) offered by DDS allow participants to build their employability within their community before searching for sustained employment. ETS is a community-based, occupational resource that individuals can utilize for up to three years. The activities conducted in the program occur in integrated settings and may include unpaid career exploration, financial management, networking, building skills leading to employment, and even health and fitness activities that are designed to lead to better employment outcomes. ETS is administered by private providers selected by the individual and occurs at libraries, gyms, banks, job centers, workforce centers, adult education sites, post-secondary schools, and other community locations. At these sites, participants may tour companies, shadow jobs, conduct informational interviews, and participate in internship or volunteer opportunities.^{lxxvi} ETS is currently the primary service received by around 224 people, and is being utilized in some capacity by 270 people.^{lxxvii}

DDS Employment Services Outcomes & Impacts

Despite an overarching goal of supporting CIE for people with IDD, the majority of individuals active with DDS are not primarily engaged in any type of employment program or receiving employment assistance services. As of December 2023, 3,654 (32%) of the 11,434 individuals receiving DDS day services were primarily engaged in any type of employment or pre-employment services. Of the 3,654 individuals primarily engaged in an employment-oriented program, 7% participated in CIE, 19% were engaged in ISE, 55% utilized GSE, 13% participated in IDV, and 6% received ETS. In total, 4,338 employment services were provided in 2023.⁴ Notably, DDS has not observed significant unmet demand for participation in these programs, and individuals waiting for employment assistance are most commonly those who have yet to be matched with a provider or an appropriate job site.^{lxxviii} DDS has also indicated that the mechanism through which their programs are funded allows them to sufficiently accommodate all prospective participants, suggesting that there is not a significant fiscal barrier to expanding engagement with their employment assistance programs.

The use of DDS employment services as the primary program with which one is engaged has declined over time, while the use of non-employment services has risen. This is due in part to a reduction in the number of businesses that are willing to participate in employment assistance programs that DDS has observed in recent years. DDS has attributed some of the decline in employment assistance program participation to lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing that many opportunities for job placement were lost during the public health emergency and that recovery has been slow.

Project SEARCH

Project SEARCH is an international program that is administered by DDS provider agencies in Connecticut and supported by state and federal funds.^{lxxix} Project SEARCH aims to assist young people aged 18 to 22 with IDD in obtaining CIE.^{lxxx} Individuals served by the program are typically transition-age youth or students in their final year of high school who have or previously had an IEP, though out-of-school youth and young adults may also be eligible for Project SEARCH. These participants are typically referred to the program through their schools, a family member, or a VR Counselor.^{lxxxi}

The first nine months of Project SEARCH consists of participants developing job skills and accumulating work experience across three different 10-week unpaid internships, which participants are required to help secure.^{lxxxii} Typically, four or five participants with IDD engage in work skill development at each site, or host business, while being supported by

⁴ This total may include duplication for individuals that participated in more than one program during the year.

skills trainers and a special education teacher. Each host business also provides a department mentor who collaborates with the instructor and skills trainers to support interns with consistent guidance and feedback, as well as classroom instruction, during the approximately five hours a day that participants spend at their internships. Throughout the three internships, the Project SEARCH staff delivers job training and develops accommodations and standard work procedures to facilitate the best possible fit between interns and host businesses. Once an intern successfully completes the program, they receive a Career Portfolio which contains a resume, letters of recommendation, a competency profile, and any awards or special recognition received while in the program.^{lxxxiii}

As of October 2024, there were 16 Project SEARCH host sites in Connecticut, with plans for three more to be opened by the end of fiscal year 2026. 180 interns participated in the project between its introduction to the state in 2015 and the 2022-23 program year, and 89% of participants successfully graduated. According to DDS, 81% of the 167 graduates so far have achieved CIE. Project SEARCH's high rate of success may be partially attributable to the much more intensive and structured nature of the program compared to traditional employment assistance programs for individuals with disabilities.

However, limited access to Project SEARCH has made the program difficult to sustain. Cohorts with between 6-8 members are ideal for ensuring the program's success, but the 16 Project SEARCH programs currently active in the state are all below capacity. This may be due in part to the exclusivity of the program to recipients of DDS services, who must have an IQ below 70 or have a PWS diagnosis to be eligible for DDS programs. The extensive time commitment required to complete Project SEARCH and the program's intensive nature suggest that this program may not be suitable for many job seekers active with DDS, who often have elevated levels of need. Because Project SEARCH itself does not have an IQ requirement, it is likely that the program would be able to reach a broader population of people with disabilities seeking employment assistance.

One-Time Employment Incentives

In addition to employee supports, DDS offers non-annualized, one-time funding to encourage providers to assist individuals in obtaining and maintaining CIE via the ISE program.^{lxxxiv} Providers may also receive payments for hitting certain benchmarks in the course of successful employment transitions. The four benchmarks that are tied to incentive payments are: (1) the creation of a career plan, (2) providing working interviews, (3) intensive job placement and training work, and (4) achieving employment benchmarks. Importantly, these reimbursements are non-annualized funds that do not affect an individual's annual DDS funding.

Career Plan Reimbursements are used to provide individuals with opportunities to explore their work preferences, develop interview skills, and have on-site work experiences, such as working interviews, while continuing their current group or day program. Funding is available for up to 10 hours of face-to-face service. Additionally, providers can receive a one-time payment for facilitating the creation of a completed Career Plan that has been reviewed and approved by DDS Resource Management. The Working Interview Incentive funds are used to assist individuals in obtaining a job interview in which their job performance is assessed over multiple days, up to 40 hours, with potential for the participant to be hired at the end. A working interview replaces the traditional, short-form interview in the hiring process. This incentive provides funds to pay an individual minimum wage and covers the cost of on-site job coaching during the working interview. Intensive Job Placement & Training Funds provide extra job training and support to promote an individual's successful transition to employment. Benchmark Payments are awarded to providers when the individuals they have supported transition to ISE and reach five benchmarks. The benchmark payments are made (1) upon an individual's job start, (2) after 3 months of employment, (3) after 6 months of employment, (4) after 12 months of employment, and (5) their transition to natural supports. These payments are awarded in addition to annualized provider funding.

DDS also offers one-time incentives for providers to enhance their staff's employment-support training. These funds allow provider staff to improve their skills in job coaching, development, benefits planning, and other areas so that they can better assist people with IDD in finding and maintaining employment.

2024 Innovative Employment Opportunity

The Innovative Employment Opportunity (IEO) grant program was recently reestablished to support the development of meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with IDD within their communities.^{bxxxv} These grants are available to support the involvement of people with IDD in entrepreneurial endeavors and the self-employment of people active with DDS. Two types of grants are offered by DDS in service of this goal: the Exploratory Grant and the Implementation/Expansion Grant.

The Exploratory Grant was established to support the development of new businesses that will positively impact the employment opportunities for individuals with IDD, as well as the business ideas of individuals with IDD themselves. Up to \$5,000 is available to those seeking to create new business opportunities for people with IDD and must be awarded prior to a business's development. The Implementation/Expansion Grant, however, is designed to fund businesses, products, or services that are already in development and are prepared to execute or expand their business or services. To be eligible for this grant, which

may range from \$10,000-\$65,000, the submitted business plan must include an itemized account of how the grant money will be used and must include the creation of CIE opportunities for individuals with IDD.^{lxxxvi} These funds may be used for marketing, consultant fees, the development of technology systems, or other similar projects related to business development and growth. Both the Exploratory and Implementation/Expansion Grants are available only to individuals with IDD, their families, and businesses dedicated to creating CIE opportunities for people with IDD. Other entities, such as provider agencies that commonly contract with DDS, are ineligible for these awards. Recipients of both IEO grants are also able to access various small business assistance services provided by a network of partner agencies, which includes the CT Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), and the University of Hartford Entrepreneurial Center. Grantees are also required to submit regular fiscal and performance reports to ensure that funds are used as intended and that awards are not being used to pay the wages of individuals with disabilities or people providing supervision and training to employees with disabilities, such as job coaches or translators.

In fiscal years 2019 and 2020, the IEO program had a budget of approximately \$500,000 and was utilized by 19 entities. Approximately 50% of the grants requested through this program in the last three years were accepted, 61% of which were Exploratory Grants.^{lxxxvii} While demand for IEO grants exceeded the program's \$500,000 capacity in the last two program years, the amount of grant money awarded has not reached the program's annual capacity since its implementation. Although many applications received for grant funding are deemed ineligible each year, information regarding their specific disqualifying factors is not currently available.

Micro-Enterprise Program

The Micro-Enterprise Program is a new initiative that went into effect on May 1, 2024. Similar to the Innovative Employment Opportunity (IEO) program, it provides individuals served by DDS access to small business startup funds through one-time grants. Grants of up to \$5,000 per individual can be used to execute entrepreneurial ideas and establish small business enterprises. Grant award decisions will be made by the DDS Micro-Enterprise Review Team, "an interdisciplinary committee made up of representatives from across DDS" that includes "members of the Employment & Day Services team, Resource Management, Case Management, and regional representation."^{lxxxviii} This team will assess applications based on the viability of the proposed business model and its potential to support CIE. While funding is available, start-up grants will be awarded to individuals with IDD who submit proposals that align with DDS' CIE guidelines, with which they may open a business based on their interests and expertise.

Recipients may use this funding to pursue entrepreneurship that aligns with their interests and expertise. Applicants may also receive assistance from qualified private providers while preparing their proposals and executing their plans once their funding applications are approved. Provider agencies themselves can also request one-time funding if their plan has been approved by the DDS Micro-Enterprise Review Team. The funds awarded by the Micro-Enterprise program may be used for equipment, training, research, marketing, or to cover any other costs associated with a micro-enterprise start-up. This funding cannot, however, be used to pay the wages of employees of the micro-enterprise.

Participants in this program will be required to report to DDS and undergo routine program evaluation, share data, and maintain communication with the department. Qualified provider agencies will be tasked with assisting these businesses in meeting Connecticut legal requirements. This program is in its implementation phase and has not served any individuals to date. DDS intends for the program to be operational by the end of 2024.

DDS Transportation

With the help of DOT, DDS assists people with disabilities in obtaining transportation to work, school, or other locations in a variety of ways. People who receive DDS services can contact their case managers about getting support for transportation options.

Transportation is also a service offered through one of the three DDS waivers. People without case managers may utilize or learn about transportation options by contacting the DDS Helpline or visiting the agency's website.

The state provides or subsidizes bus, paratransit, and train transportation for people with disabilities. All buses in the state have wheelchair lifts or ramps. The state subsidizes the cost of bus and train transport for people with a qualifying disability, enabling them to travel for a reduced fare at any time on CT Rail, CT Transit and all bus systems operating under contract to the DOT. Connecticut also provides federally mandated ADA paratransit services at no cost to users in the CT Transit service areas. Both reduced fares and paratransit services are only available to people with very limited mobility and high levels of need.^{lxxxix}

DDS can provide funding for private providers to offer employment-related transportation to people with IDD if public transportation is insufficient. In these cases, and often as part of GSE, private providers will arrange the transportation necessary to facilitate employment and be reimbursed for that transportation through DDS employment and day funding. There currently is no quantitative data on the degree to which transportation barriers may inhibit employment for people with disabilities in Connecticut.

Department of Labor

As the state agency primarily responsible for promoting and protecting the interests of Connecticut's workforce, DOL administers a variety of programs to assist job seekers, including those with disabilities. In partnership with the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, DOL maintains a website containing various resources for both job seekers and employers, including information related to the benefits and availability of assistive technology, tax credits, workplace accommodations, and disability employment assistance programs in Connecticut.^{xc} DOL also administers numerous programs that enable individuals with disabilities to attain and maintain employment. The agency works closely with BRS, DDS, the Workforce Development Boards and local service providers to ensure that clients are matched with the programs that are best aligned with their employment goals and needs.

American Job Centers

Established as part of the federal Workforce Opportunity Investment Act (WIOA), American Job Centers (AJCs) are designed to offer a wide range of employment assistance resources all in one location. By visiting any of the 20 AJCs located across Connecticut or connecting with an AJC career counselor virtually, job seekers can discover which jobs and careers might be right for them, write cover letters, create resumes, and receive help obtaining interviews. AJCs also offer employment referrals and recruitment services for businesses with job openings.^{xcii} A portion of the federal and state funding available to AJCs is also allocated to Connecticut's five Regional Workforce Development Boards (WDBs). This enables the Centers to contract with private providers of employment assistance, as well as to support programmatic partnerships with CTDOL, CSDE, and ADS (including BRS).

Although AJCs do not uniquely specialize in serving people with disabilities, the WIOA and Wagner-Peyser employment programs administered through AJCs play an important role in supporting employment for people with disabilities. Additionally, many AJCs retain a BRS vocational rehabilitation counselor or a WIOA counselor on-site to provide direct assistance to this population of job seekers.^{xciii} The CTDOL also recently increased the capacity of the AJCs to serve people with disabilities as a result of the new CT PIE and BRIDGE CT federal Disability Employment Initiative grants obtained by BRS.^{xciii} In FY 2022, 1,188 individuals that received Wagner-Peyser or WIOA employment services through Connecticut AJCs reported having a disability.⁵

⁵ Because individuals are not required to disclose their disability to receive CTDOL services, the true number of people with disabilities who utilized AJCs during FY 2022 is likely higher.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act & Wagner-Peyser

WIOA is a federal act that provides funds to states to help job seekers, workers, and businesses with career services, job training, education, and workforce development. The goals of the program are to improve the quality of the workforce, increase economic self-sufficiency of individuals, meet the skill needs of employers, and enhance productivity and competitiveness. DOL oversees both the distribution of these funds to the state's five WDBs and the administration of certain WIOA activities and services. The WDBs allocate their WIOA funds to local organizations that help unemployed and underemployed individuals to succeed in the job market, gain new job skills, find a new job, complete their education, obtain training, increase their income, and more. WIOA programs provide long-term case management to all job seekers, including those with disabilities, and prioritize helping clients achieve CIE. DOL administers the federal funding appropriated for WIOA, which totaled \$34,312,089 in 2023. Between April 2022 and March 2023, 2,086 individuals in Connecticut exited WIOA programs, 180 of which had a disability.^{xciv}

The Wagner-Peyser Act also assists people in achieving employment, though these programs are less individualized than those established under WIOA. Wagner-Peyser does not operate as a case management program, but it provides basic career services, workshops, labor market information, and assistance to job seekers. 10% of the funding must be reserved for performance incentives for public employment service programs and "services for groups with special needs."^{xcv} In Connecticut, 8,020 individuals exited Wagner-Peyser programs between April 2022 and March 2023. 530 of these exiters self-identified as having a disability.⁶

Department of Economic and Community Development

JobsCT Tax Rebate Program

The JobsCT Tax Rebate program, administered by DECD, was established in 2022 to incentivize large employers to enter Connecticut, as well as create and maintain jobs for people with disabilities in the state.^{xcvi} Under JobsCT provisions included in Public Acts 23-137 and 24-149, companies that establish operations in the state and create positions for either (a) 25 new full-time equivalent employees (FTE), or (b) 15 FTEs if at least one of these

⁶ Individuals may participate in Wagner-Peyser and WIOA programs concurrently. As a result, there may be some duplication between the two programs' total participant and exit counts.

FTEs has an intellectual disability, may qualify for substantial tax rebates if they maintain eligibility across several program years. In addition, FTEs must be paid at least 85% of the median household income of the municipality in which the jobs will be based and no less than \$37,500 per year. To claim the rebate, the qualifying company must maintain the 15-25 new positions during the first two years of their participation in the JobsCT program without decreasing the number of people employed prior to the introduction of these new positions. After satisfying this condition, the company is eligible to receive the rebate, which is equal to 25-50% of the withholding taxes from net new employees, in program years three through seven as long as they continue to maintain the required positions, with additional rebate credits to be issued in years eight and nine at the discretion of the DECD commissioner.

\$40 million is available through JobsCT Rebate Program each fiscal year, with an average annual credit allotment of \$571,513 projected through 2033. However, the program has yet to be utilized, which is attributable in part to the recent program changes enacted in PA 24-149. Under the act, DECD is also required to publicize information about the rebate on the agency's website by January 1, 2025, which shall include descriptions of how the program works, who may qualify, and the advantages of creating positions for individuals with intellectual disability. Due to the novelty of this program, increased marketing to ensure that prospective participants are aware of the rebates available under JobsCT may prompt greater participation in future years.

IDD Workforce Development Grant Program

The IDD Workforce Development Grant Program was created through Section 63 of Public Act 23-137, though it has not yet been implemented. DECD is currently working with a third-party entity to launch the program and aims to have it fully established before the end of FY 2025. The program was designed to provide businesses with funding for “infrastructure expenditures, start-up costs or expansion costs.”

To qualify for grant funding, applicants must represent businesses with at least 10% of their total positions filled by employees with IDD. Businesses at which employees with IDD constitute 10-30% of the total workforce may be awarded grants of up to \$25,000, and businesses employing any proportion of people with IDD higher than 30% may receive grants of up to \$75,000. \$1 million in bonding funds were appropriated for this program upon its creation in 2023. However, utilization of this funding has been deferred until the Grant Program is fully operationalized.

Department of Administrative Services

Janitorial Work Program

Initially established in 2006 and permanently adopted in 2013,^{xcvii} the Janitorial Work Program (also referred to as the Qualified Partnership (QP) and Preferred Purchasing (PP) Programs) is a state-driven initiative designed to create stable and meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities, as well as other economically disadvantaged groups.^{xcviii} This program allows prospective contractors to receive preference for state contracts through two distinct processes: QP and PP. Under the program, which is administered by DAS and the Non-Profit Alliance, commercial contractors that commit to filling a portion of the full-time equivalent positions (FTEs) under their state contract with members of these groups receive preference during the bidding process. The Janitorial Work Program also includes provisions that guarantee adequate supports and payment for all workers. While custodial work has historically been the primary industry employing people with disabilities through this program, qualified partnerships and preferred purchasing are also applicable to other types of contracts, such as landscaping.

Qualified Partnership

In a qualified partnership, a commercial contractor partners with a CRP to staff a contract for services. One-third of employees staffed through QP contracts must have a disability and an additional one-third must belong to other disadvantaged groups, and QP contractors must pay all employees a standard wage regardless of ability status.^{xcix} Individuals with disabilities selected for employment under this program must be certified by BRS as eligible to participate in a qualified partnership. Contractors are also required to submit a list of their employees with disabilities and other disadvantages to the Alliance within six months of the commencement date of their contract and must recertify annually with DAS that they meet the requisite proportion of employees from each group. Additionally, contractors are expected to integrate employees with disabilities into their organization's general workforce, position them alongside other workers in similar settings and with comparable responsibilities, and afford them the same opportunities for promotion as other employees.^c QPs make up 18 of the 110 state custodial service contracts currently active in Connecticut.

23 individuals with disabilities were employed across 14 contracts through the QP program in fiscal year 2023. Four QP contracts, however, did not include any employees with disabilities.^{ci} Although the program seeks to fill one-third of all QP positions with employees with disabilities, this group represents approximately 20% of all those employed under these contracts. Programmatic data also show that employees with disabilities worked

fewer hours and were paid hourly wages that were \$0.78 less on average than their counterparts without disabilities across state QP contracts during the year.^{cii}

Preferred Purchasing

Through preferred purchasing (PP), DAS grants preference to the Nonprofit Alliance, who bids on behalf of private providers and CRPs offering employment to people with disabilities. Because selection of PP contracts is largely based on each bid's proximity to a Fair Market Value (FMV) that has been calculated by DAS for the service, a bid submitted below the FMV which includes employees with disabilities will be prioritized first for the contract. However, if an employer of people with disabilities submits a bid in excess of the FMV, the contract may be awarded to another entity that bid below the FMV, even if they do not have any employees with disabilities. Additionally, DAS is authorized to give a 10% price preference to any company in which people with intellectual disability make up at least 10% of employees.^{ciii} While there is no limit on the number of employees QP contractors may assign to a job, bidders may only qualify for the PP process if they have no more than 4 FTEs. In PP contracts, the CRP is also responsible for transporting employees with disabilities to and from their job sites and supporting them on location for the duration of the contract. Whereas employment for people with disabilities under QP contracts is comparable to competitive integrated employment (CIE), employment through PP is similar to a group supported employment (GSE) model.

There were 87 active PP contracts throughout the state in 2023 that employed a total of 372 personnel with disabilities. This total has declined steadily each year since 2018, during which there were 157 active PP contracts across which 761 individuals with disabilities were employed.^{civ}

Janitorial Work Program Outcomes & Impacts

Despite the decline in participation observed in recent years, the Janitorial Work Program remains an important source of gainful employment for disabled and economically disadvantaged workers in the state. Beyond employment, the program also improves participants' future employability by enabling individuals to develop valuable job skills, gain marketable work experience, and enhance their ability to work self-sufficiently. By having individuals with disabilities work alongside employees without disabilities, this program also has the ability to foster more inclusive work environments and reduce the social stigma surrounding workers with disabilities.

Although other states operate programs that are comparable to Connecticut's Janitorial Work Program, there is substantial variation in how these programs operate. Since 2018, several states, including Delaware, Indiana, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Oregon, and New

York, have experienced declines in the amount of people employed through their versions of the QP and PP contracting programs, similar to the trends observed in Connecticut. Some other states, including Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, and Texas, experienced stable or increased employment of people with disabilities through their programs during this period. Because these programs are not standardized across states, it is difficult to draw conclusions from these contrasting trends without a more comprehensive analysis of the functioning of these programs elsewhere.

Department of Social Services

Waiver for Persons with Autism

DSS administers the waiver for persons with autism, which provides various supports to such persons who do not qualify for DDS services. To be eligible for the waiver, an individual must have “substantial limitations in two or more of the following major life activities: (1) self-care, (2) understanding and use of language, (3) learning, (4) mobility, (5) self-direction, or (6) capacity for independent living.” An additional eligibility requirement is that the functional impairments must have been diagnosed before the age of 22 and “be expected to continue indefinitely.”^{cv} The waiver provides a wide variety of supports to individuals with autism, including clinical behavioral supports, assistive technology, transportation, respite, and job coaching. All of the services provided are implemented by a network of qualified private providers that is largely shared between DSS and DDS. Waiver funding of up to \$50,000 per person per year is allocated on an individualized basis and is used to compensate private providers for the direct services that they render. As of October 2024, the average annual allocation based on each individual’s care plan was \$24,007 per person.^{cvi}

The autism waiver is not an entitlement, and applicants are therefore placed on a waitlist as demand currently exceeds the program’s capacity. As of October 2024, there were 233 active waiver participants. Of the 233 active participants, 49 were using job coaches, and 25 were working with BRS to find employment. Additionally, 52 individuals receiving waiver services were employed at least part-time. The legislature added 120 waiver slots for FY 2025 and funded new case managers in FY 2025 to support an additional 200 waiver slots beginning in FY 2026.^{cvi}

The only waiver service that solely provides employment supports is job coaching, which provides support to individuals as they work. Life skills coaches can also assist waiver participants with completing job applications, tracking job responses, and other job-

search activities. In addition, behaviorists work closely with employed waiver participants in providing job supports, which helps individuals maintain their employment. As of October 2024, 185 waiver participants were working with life skills coaches and 85 waiver participants were working with behaviorists. Not all of the participants who work with life skills coaches and/or behaviorists are engaged in or are pursuing employment. However, a significant number of individuals receiving waiver services use a portion of their budgeted funds for some form of employment supports. For the 12-month period prior to October 2024, the average cost per individual for job coaching was \$7,029, with job coaching expenditures totaling \$344,462.^{cviii}

Federal Resources

Ticket-to-Work

Ticket-to-Work is a Social Security program that assists recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). This program allows people with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 65 to obtain vocational counseling, job training through WIOA or other programs, job readiness training, job referrals, and other no-cost employment support services. Whereas participating in vocational rehabilitation or otherwise gaining employment may make an individual become ineligible for Social Security assistance, Ticket-to-Work allows participants to retain their state disability benefits for a nine-month period while they transition into the workplace.^{ciix} Ticket-to-Work also allows individuals with a “ticket” to maintain healthcare benefits during their transition, reinstate their benefits if they must stop working, and avoid receiving a medical ‘Continuing Disability Review’ that assesses their disability status for the duration of their program participation.^{cx} The objective of the program is to increase the financial independence of beneficiaries, support employment for people with disabilities, and reduce reliance on state disability benefits for those who want to work full-time.

When a program participant selects an entity, such as an employment network (EN) or VR agency, through which to redeem their ticket, that entity then assists them with finding and maintaining employment. Such services provided by the accepting agency may consist of training, career counseling, vocational rehabilitation, job placement, and other support services.^{cxii} In return, the entity receives funding from the Social Security Administration (SSA) based on the employment outcomes and milestones that a ticket holder achieves. In Connecticut, there are 41 ticket agencies in 28 physical locations that make up the entire state EN, but tickets are predominantly used in combination with the VR program at BRS. Approximately 40% of VR participants receive social security benefits, rendering them

eligible for Ticket-to-Work as long as they meet the age requirements and are pursuing full-time employment. As of March 2024, 117,767 people in Connecticut received disability benefits and were eligible for Ticket-to-Work. At the same time, 2,142 tickets were active among VR and EN clients, 74% of which were redeemed for VR services, specifically.

Historically, the number of individuals enrolled in Ticket-to-Work has represented a small proportion of those eligible for the program. To qualify for Ticket-to-Work, one must be receiving SSDI or SSI and have a disability that is certified by BRS. Qualifying disabilities that would permit an SSI recipient to participate in Ticket-to-Work include, but are not limited to, intellectual and developmental disabilities. Because only individuals with a “severe” disability, which includes any condition that has “significantly limited [the individual’s] ability to do basic work-related activities, such as lifting, standing, walking, sitting, or remembering for at least 12 months,” may be eligible for SSDI, it is difficult to estimate how many eligible individuals refrained from participating in Ticket-to-Work due to a long-term physical or cognitive barrier to employment.^{cxii} This limitation poses a significant challenge in determining whether the high rates of non-participation among eligible individuals may be attributed in large part to a gap in information about the program and its benefits or if much of this phenomenon results from the severity of the disabilities that qualify individuals for SSDI.

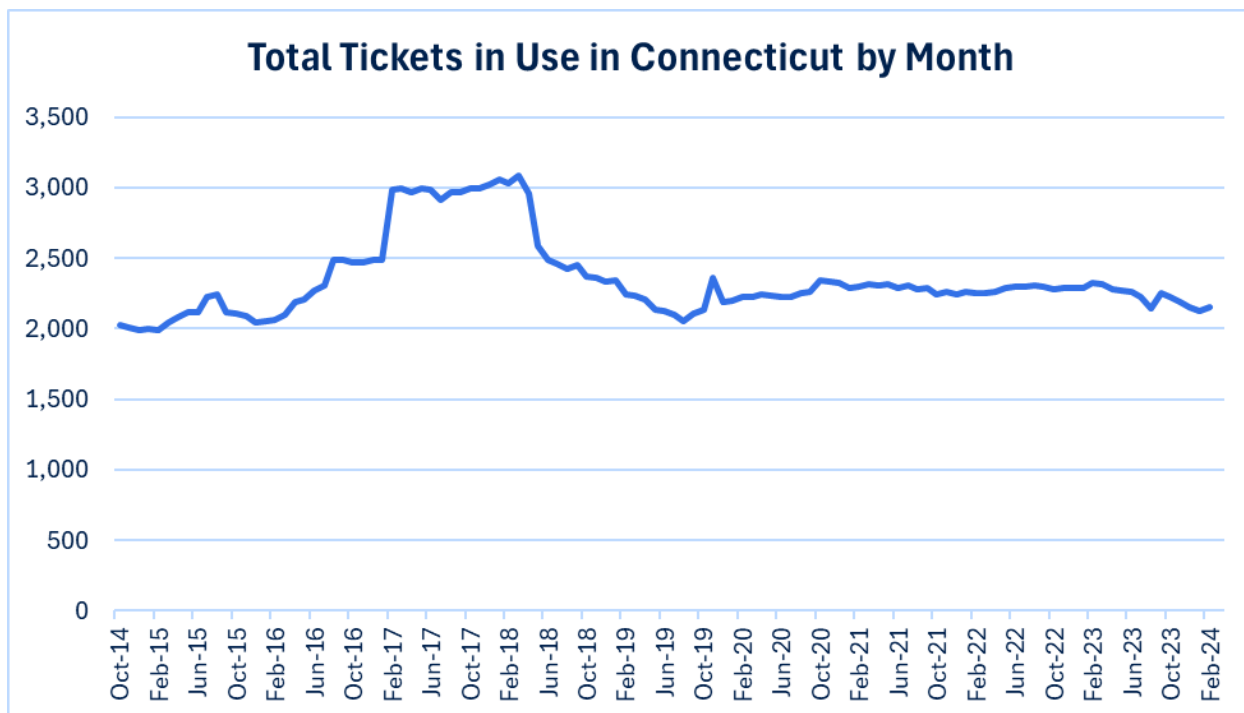


Figure 2. Source: DCDRDP. “Ticket Tracker Reports | the Work Site | SSA.” 2014-2024. www.ssa.gov. Accessed June 17, 2024.

The total number of individuals eligible for Ticket-to-Work and the number of tickets in circulation have remained largely consistent over time, with the exception of a brief increase in program participation between June 2016 and February 2018. The number of people using Ticket-to-Work constitutes a small but significant proportion of the people with disabilities who are employed or seeking employment in Connecticut.

Tax Incentives

Three tax incentive programs are available to employers who hire individuals with disabilities in the State of Connecticut by way of Federal policy: the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), the Disabled Access Credit, and the Barrier Removal Tax Deduction.

Work Opportunity Tax Credit

WOTC is a federal business credit available to employers who hire individuals from certain targeted groups that face barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities. Businesses that employ BRS VR program participants or individuals who are active with DDS meet this criterion and are eligible for this credit. The regulations for the credit are set by the IRS and the U.S. Department of Labor, but the program is administered by CTDOL at the state level. Aiming to incentivize the hiring of people belonging to disadvantaged groups, the program offers tax deductions to employers for all such new hires who remain employed for at least one year. For each newly hired employee who was referred by a VR counselor, is enrolled in SSI, or participates in Ticket-to-Work, a company may receive a federal tax deduction equal to 40% of up to \$6,000 in wages paid to the employee during their first year of employment (i.e., up to \$2,400). To qualify, an employee must perform at least 400 hours of services for the employer seeking the credit.^{cxiii} WOTC is currently authorized until December 31, 2025, and therefore has the potential to sunset in the next two years.^{cxiv}

Between 2021 and 2023, DOL received 11,644 WOTC certification requests pertaining to individuals who were either referred by VR or who receive SSI. 36% of these requests were certified and 56% were denied. The remaining 8% of requests were pending. When processing WOTC applications, DOL must manually review the qualifying criteria under which each claim was made through various state agencies that possess the information needed to verify an applicant's eligibility. For applications related to VR referrals, verification requests must be processed through BRS to ensure that employees included in each application either were active participants in a VR program at the start of their employment or had completed their VR program participation no more than two years prior to their hire date. However, while data on the specific reasons for the large percentage of denials were unavailable for this study, it is possible that many applicants exploring eligibility under this criterion do not fully understand the conditions needed to satisfy the

requirement. It is also possible that a large proportion of job applicants that select this criterion under IRS Form 8850 may erroneously certify that they were referred by a state rehabilitation agency without receiving VR services in the previous two years or may have misunderstood the form's language and not received VR services at all.

Although many of the applications submitted to DOL concern new hires that do not qualify their employer for the credit, the data indicate that, with an average of more than 640 approved WOTC applications related to new hires with disabilities each year, WOTC has been an effective incentive for promoting the employment of individuals with disabilities.

Disabled Access Credit

The Disabled Access Credit provides a non-refundable credit of up to \$5,000 to small businesses that incur expenses related to providing accommodations to individuals with disabilities, addressing a significant barrier that may otherwise impede employment for this population. Although this credit does not directly incentivize the employment of people with disabilities, it does incentivize businesses to make themselves accessible to both consumers and employees alike. To qualify for the credit, applying businesses must have earned \$1 million or less in the preceding fiscal year or have no more than 30 full-time employees. These small businesses, though, can claim the credit every year that they incur qualifying accessibility costs. Such qualifying expenses include improvements that remove physical barriers to access (e.g., ramp installation), provide qualified interpreters or “other methods of making audio materials available” to individuals with hearing impairments, deliver “methods of making visual materials available” to individuals with visual impairments, or otherwise supply or modify equipment devices for individuals with disabilities.^{cxv} This credit is allotted based on particular expenditures and reimburses companies who pay for services or adjustments that accommodate employees with disabilities. These expenditures must be necessary for the business to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the credit covers only 50% of any given expenditure that exceeds \$250 up to a maximum cap of \$5000.^{cxvi}

Barrier Removal Tax Deduction

The Barrier Removal Tax Deduction incentivizes businesses of any size to remove architectural and transportation barriers to people with disabilities. Businesses may claim up to \$15,000 a year in deductions by listing expenditures for increased accessibility as a separate expense on their income tax return. Eligible expenses include removing mobility barriers from a facility (e.g., widening a doorway or installing a ramp), providing accessibility services (e.g., sign language interpreters), providing printed materials in accessible formats (e.g., braille, large print, or audio), or otherwise providing or modifying equipment to promote accessibility.^{cxvii} Notably, the Barrier Removal Tax Deduction may be

claimed in combination with the Disabled Access Credit as long as the expenses meet the requirements for each program. Further, these tax incentives may be claimed along with the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, allowing employers to maximize the benefits associated with hiring and accommodating individuals with disabilities. Because claims for the Disabled Access Credit and the Barrier Removal Tax Deduction are submitted through an employer's tax filings with the IRS, data on the utilization of these incentives in Connecticut were not available for inclusion in this study.

Federal Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN)

Another resource available to employers seeking to recruit and retain employees with disabilities is the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) tool, which may be accessed on AskEARN.org. EARN is a free resource funded by the federal Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and maintained by the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Through EARN, employers have access to online tools and information that enable them to create a disability-inclusive workplace and improve their ability to recruit, hire, retain, and promote people with disabilities. Available resources include an extensive portfolio of research and educational material related to disability employment, online courses and webinars to train employers in a variety of employment topics, information on tax benefits and other federal incentives for hiring people with disabilities, and access to numerous online job boards that help employers identify and connect with qualified candidates with disabilities.^{cxviii}

EARN outlines seven core components of a disability-inclusive workplace, which include maintaining an inclusive business culture, building a pipeline for outreach and recruitment, hiring and retaining employees, providing reasonable accommodations, communicating company policies and practices, ensuring that information and communication technology are accessible, and measuring outcomes to track progress toward DEI goals. It also offers a menu of strategies for achieving these goals. AskEARN.org is frequently updated with emerging and developing information on disability employment issues, as well as interpretations of federal and state disability employment policies. EARN also produces a "Think Tank" report each year on the key challenges and potential solutions to improving recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement outcomes for individuals with disabilities. In this report, the Yang-Tan Institute offers state and federal policy recommendations, as well as directions for establishing human resources policies and practices that promote successful disability inclusion.

National Trends & Best Practices

While Connecticut has made significant progress in promoting the employment of people with disabilities, a range of innovative policies have been implemented elsewhere that may provide meaningful insights into strategies for bolstering the state's existing efforts. These diverse approaches reflect a growing commitment to creating inclusive work environments and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities across the country. Notable examples of state policies with promising employment outcomes commonly relate to expanding transition services for youth, promoting employer inclusivity training, developing novel financial incentive structures, and creating additional employment opportunities through other innovations in state policies. Further research has also highlighted benefits related to modified interview practices and additional employment accommodations that, through state promotion, may further reduce barriers to attaining employment for job seekers with IDD.

Transition Services

Providing transition services to high school students with disabilities, such as those offered through Project SEARCH, has been shown to be one of the most effective strategies for producing positive employment outcomes for this population. Studies have shown that students with IDD who receive transition services, especially those that include employment planning, are significantly more likely to secure employment after high school graduation than are individuals who do not receive these services.^{cxxix} One 2018 study estimated that students with IDD who receive job readiness services while in school are approximately 7.36 times more likely to secure paid employment in adulthood than students that do not receive these services.^{cxxx} As a result, many states that administer Project SEARCH programs, including Connecticut, have dedicated resources toward expanding opportunities for participation in recent years.

States have taken a variety of approaches to providing transition services. **Oklahoma**, for example, offers students the opportunity to spend their final semester of high school in supported employment, gaining work experience that counts toward their credit requirement to graduate.^{cxxxi} These students are supported by VR counselors for the duration of their participation in the program to ensure their success.^{cxxxi} In addition to Project SEARCH, **Wisconsin** administers an employer reimbursement program that supports up to 500 hours of community-based work experience for youth with disabilities. Through this program, which is offered through the state's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, students are able to develop transferable job skills at no cost to participating employers.

Financial Incentives

Several states have also created various financial incentives beyond those available at the federal level to incentivize employers to hire and accommodate individuals with disabilities. **New York** offers a tax credit of 35% of the first \$6,000 in wages paid to employees with disabilities in their second year of employment, which expands upon the 40% first-year tax credit claimable under the federal WOTC program. Employers may claim this second-year credit for all employees receiving services from the state vocational rehabilitation program, as well as for those who were eligible for the WOTC in their first year of employment.^{cxxiii} **Massachusetts** offers a similar incentive, whereby employers may claim a tax credit for 30% of an employee with disability's wages up to \$5,000 following the first 12 months of that employee's continuous employment.^{cxxiv} This structure incentivizes employers to retain these employees and provide even more extensive work experience, rather than simply hire and train individuals with disabilities only while they are WOTC-eligible.

Rather than reimbursing a percentage of an employee's wages, **Delaware** allows employers to claim \$1,500 for each employee hired through the state's VR programs for two consecutive years.^{cxxv} **Tennessee** offers a one-time \$2,000 tax credit for each qualifying part-time job created for individuals with disabilities and \$5,000 for each such full-time job, claimable for the year in which the job(s) were established.^{cxxvi} These jobs must be filled by individuals receiving state services directly related to their disabilities, and they must be continuously employed for at least 12 months before the credit may be claimed. Full-time employees must also be enrolled in the employer's health insurance program to qualify for the \$5,000 credit.^{cxxvii}

Other state models include the provision of tax deductions, rather than credits, which employers may claim for a period after employing an individual with a disability. An employer that hires an individual with IDD in **Louisiana**, for example, may be eligible for a tax deduction that covers up to 50% of gross wages paid to the individual during the first four months of continuous employment, as well as 30% of wages paid in all subsequent months that they remain competitively employed and are working at least 20 hours per week.^{cxxviii} In **Iowa**, employers of individuals with disabilities may claim similar deductions for 65% of wages paid to individuals with disabilities in the first 12 months of their employment.^{cxxix}

To further reduce the barriers related to the employment of individuals with disabilities, some states have implemented incentive programs that enable employers to provide accommodations to their employees more easily. **Maryland's** Disability Employment Tax Credit offers employers an annual credit of up to \$2,700 for each employee with a disability

during their first and second years of employment, as well as up to \$900 in the first year and \$500 in the second year for expenses related to the provision of transportation or childcare for each qualifying employee.^{cxxx} **Minnesota** is currently operating a pilot program which offers employers with fewer than 500 employees and gross annual revenue less than \$5 million the ability to request compensation for expenses related to providing reasonable accommodations for job applicants and employees with disabilities. Under the program, employers may be reimbursed up to \$30,000 per fiscal year and are given access to a coordinator who provides technical assistance with a range of accessibility-oriented tasks as needed.^{cxxxi}

Employer Inclusivity Training

As a means of addressing barriers to employment and encouraging inclusive hiring practices, states have also implemented initiatives that include offering innovative trainings to employers. Training programs such as the Windmills program offered by BRS in Connecticut serve to educate employers about the benefits of employing people with disabilities, alleviate any concerns that they may have, and promote best practices for engaging with this population. **New York's** EmployAbility program functions similarly to Windmills, where voluntary participants may acquire techniques for improving the diversity of their workforce and learn from the successes experienced by other businesses. In exchange for completing the program, employers are provided resources that signal their inclusivity to prospective clients, business partners, and job applicants, which include a window decal, a digital badge for their website, and public recognition on an online list of employers who have taken the 'EmployAbility Pledge.'^{cxxxii}

Research has shown that mentorship networks constitute an alternative employer training model with similar effectiveness for promoting the employment of people with disabilities. Under such a program, employers may learn best practices for hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities directly from peer businesses that have done so successfully. This allows participating employers the opportunity to discuss any concerns that they may have or challenges that they have faced with peers who can share their own experiences related to attracting, interviewing, hiring, training, and providing accommodations for people with disabilities. This type of program was recommended for **Colorado** in a 2017 report issued by the state's Employment First Advisory Partnership, though the concept was never realized. The Colorado Business Leadership Network was designed to rely upon community outreach to foster engagement between businesses in pursuit of these positive employment and inclusive hiring outcomes.^{cxxxiii}

Modified Interviews

While evidence suggests that traditional interviews pose a significant barrier to employment for job seekers with disabilities, there are no state-level precedents for encouraging or mandating interview modifications beyond what is required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under the ADA, interviewers are required to provide reasonable interview accommodations upon request, which most often include enabling captioning for video calls, providing American Sign Language Interpreters, involving a job coach in the interview, conducting situational assessments, or permitting a written interview in lieu of a phone interview.^{cxxxiv} However, individuals with disabilities often choose not to disclose their disability to a potential employer and/or do not request interview accommodations.

Additionally, research has found that individuals with IDD benefit from further alterations to the standard interview structure which take their cognitive differences into account. Whereas traditional interviews commonly require candidates to interpret social cues and the subtle intentionality of interview questions, modified interviews minimize these challenges for neurodivergent candidates and enable them to present themselves more authentically. Examples of modifications cited as particularly beneficial for interviewees with IDD include making questions more direct so that the information sought by the interviewers is clearer, breaking long or multifaceted questions into smaller distinct parts, providing interviewees with a physical copy of the questions asked, and providing the questions that will be asked in advance of the interview. These accommodations allow candidates with IDD to process questions more easily and demonstrate their qualifications with less pressure and anxiety than is often experienced during standard interviews. Studies have shown that these adaptations are particularly effective for improving interviewers' perceptions of job candidates with autism, though modified interviews have also been found to benefit neurotypical candidates to a lesser extent.^{cxxxv} This evidence suggests that policies that promote awareness or guidance on interview modification best practices may be effective for reducing interview barriers to employment.

Other Innovations

Several states have implemented a variety of other novel initiatives to promote the employment of people with disabilities, including funding ambitious job trial programs, establishing state hiring goals, and modifying their contract procurement processes. **Minnesota**, for example, is currently piloting a program titled Connect 700, through which individuals with disabilities are able to work in a paid position with the State of Minnesota for up to 700 hours to demonstrate their qualifications for long-term employment. If participating candidates are able to perform the essential duties of the position within the

700-hours trial period, either with or without accommodations, they are permitted to assume the position permanently.^{cxxxvi} Connect 700 is intended to subvert the traditional interview and assessment process, which may not accurately reflect a candidate's abilities, and create an alternate path to employment for this population. In 2020, 200 participants (67% of those appointed to pre-probationary positions) successfully completed the 700-hour trial and became permanent employees of the state.^{cxxxvii} This program is administered in pursuit of Minnesota's goal of staffing 10% of the executive branch workforce with individuals with disabilities.^{cxxxviii} Another comparable work experience model offered in **Maryland**, the Quality, Understanding, Excellence, Success and Training (QUEST) program, provides students with disabilities opportunities to participate in paid three-month internships in the state's government.^{cxxxix}

Oregon, like Connecticut, administers a contracting and procurement program to promote the inclusion of workers with disabilities in contracts for state service. Oregon Forward operates through collaborative contracting between the Oregon Department of Administrative Services (OR DAS) and non-profit organizations employing people with disabilities for state-use work, also referred to as Oregon Forward Contractors (OFCs).^{cxl} Under the program, any entity that procures certain goods and services that are supported by tax dollars is required to seek them first from OFCs before initiating a competitive bidding process. OR DAS maintains a list of items that public entities are required to procure through OFCs when possible, which includes activities such as janitorial services and grounds maintenance, information technology (IT) services, confidential records destruction, textile manufacturing, and indoor plant maintenance.^{cxli} To qualify for OFC status, a nonprofit must employ individuals with disabilities such that they account for 60% of the direct labor hours necessary for the production or provision of goods and services.^{cxlii}

Recommendations

Consider collecting more data to assess current needs for disability employment supports

- Analyze survey and interview data collected from people with IDD and their caregivers, Medicaid claims data, and Census data to identify the current demand for employment services. Similar to a survey done in Pennsylvania, these data would quantify the scope of needs and inform policy development.^{cxliii}

Assess the feasibility of creating a pilot program for an Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund

- Consider a pilot program to provide one-time grant funding to reimburse mid-sized businesses for expenses related to providing accommodations to job applicants and employees with disabilities. A feasibility assessment can review examples of other such programs, including the one in Minnesota.^{cxliv}

Facilitate increased use of transition services through Project SEARCH

- Explore options to coordinate with DDS and SDE to make this program available to more transition-age youth.
- Conduct outreach to LEAs to promote this program.

Explore opportunities for outreach to businesses regarding the current benefits available for hiring people with disabilities

- Review opportunities to create and distribute a disability employment toolkit that includes descriptions of the tax incentives and programs currently available. This information may be shared in a variety of ways, such as providing it to new businesses at the time of their incorporation.
- Consider creating and publishing fact sheets on appropriate agency websites with information from BRS and DDS including:
 - ADA accommodation rights and requirements,
 - Available tax incentives,
 - Best practices in hiring, including modified and working interviews,
 - Programs that facilitate internships, on-the-job training, employer-customized training, and wage-reimbursement programs,
 - Free Windmills customized workplace trainings, and
 - Free employer resources, such as EARN.
- Maintain a list of employers who have completed Windmills training on the BRS and DDS websites. Such a list would publicize employers' participation in the disability employment awareness training, promoting the businesses' commitment to creating an inclusive work environment for employees with disabilities.

Assess potential benefits and fiscal impact of offering a tax credit for jobs created for people with disabilities which include enrollment in the employer's health plan

- Explore opportunities to incentivize businesses to create new positions for individuals with disabilities that include enrollment in the employer's health plan. Such incentives may include a one-time tax credit for each new job created where the employee is retained for a determined period of time (e.g., 12 months), similar to the model implemented in Tennessee.^{cxlv}

- Consider enhanced incentives for employers that enroll individuals with disabilities in affordable health plans, including those without substantial annual deductibles.

Conclusion

Throughout the development of this report, the Office of Policy and Management collaborated with various state agencies that offer employment assistance to members of the disability community and convened with various stakeholder groups to validate the findings and recommendations presented. The evaluation of existing state and federal employment programs for people with disabilities revealed that multiple agencies in Connecticut, including BRS, DDS, DSS and DOL, offer a wide range of services to accommodate the various needs, abilities, and preferences of individuals with disabilities. Such resources include pre-employment transition services for students, employment readiness and skill-building programs, internships, working interviews, and on-the-job supports. Numerous incentives are also currently available to employers, including tax benefits and employee wage reimbursements, to encourage the recruitment and accommodation of individuals with disabilities in the state.

While some programs have reported decreased utilization in recent years, participation declines are largely attributable to post-pandemic workforce sustainability challenges and insufficient employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities. Further, findings from this study suggested that, although numerous incentives are offered at both the federal and state level to encourage employers to hire individuals with disabilities, many employers may be unaware that these benefits are available or may not know how to access them. For some individuals with disabilities, these factors have contributed to longer than usual wait times before they receive career supports, are paired with suitable sites for on-the-job skill development, or attain long-term employment.

Based on these findings, OPM recommends several measures to further explore strategies for addressing these gaps, reducing employers' barriers to hiring candidates with disabilities, and increasing the number and variety of job opportunities available to this population. Such recommendations include promoting awareness of the benefits of, and best practices related to, hiring individuals with disabilities; evaluating the feasibility and impact of additional employer incentives; and assessing options for extending transition and job readiness services to more students with disabilities.

OPM also observed that, although agency administrative data and information from national sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, provide meaningful context regarding the number of people with disabilities who are employed or receiving employment services in Connecticut, these data are insufficient to illustrate this population's remaining unmet needs. The collection of additional data to identify job

seekers' current barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment may improve the state's ability to develop and prioritize interventions that effectively target these service gaps.

Although many resources are currently available to individuals with disabilities across several state agencies, additional efforts may further increase employment opportunities by identifying and addressing this population's outstanding needs. By prioritizing business engagement and awareness, the state may bolster its agencies' programs and improve employers' general receptiveness to hiring and advancing individuals with disabilities. The data from this study's proposed needs assessment, the transportation study conducted pursuant to PA 23-137 § 20, and the results of the OWS initiative to build a workforce pipeline pursuant to PA 23-137 § 11 may also collectively identify the most meaningful areas for further intervention over the coming years. These insights will be beneficial for shaping future initiatives that are responsive to the community's needs, yield measurable improvements in employment outcomes for people with disabilities, and maximize the efficient use of state resources.

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