

Executive Summary

Employment Opportunities for Rural Residents with Disabilities in Pennsylvania



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Historically, there has been a significant gap in employment rates between people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and those without. However, recent changes in federal and state public policy are aimed at reducing this disparity. In June 2018, Governor Tom Wolf signed the Employment First Act, which requires state, county, and other entities receiving public funds to first consider competitive integrated employment for individuals with a disability who are eligible to work under state law. Currently, state agencies are in the process of developing regulations to implement the act and realigning services to address the barriers people experience in securing competitive employment.

Activities

This research identified the opportunities for competitive employment for individuals with IDD; analyzed the barriers for obtaining such employment, with a focus on rural barriers; and identified

the strategies other states are using successfully, examining their potential for Pennsylvania. The research team used a mixed methods approach, including surveys of service providers, secondary data analysis of state labor data, focus groups with families of individuals with IDD and with service providers, and interviews with individuals representing various stakeholder groups at the regional, state and national levels.

Data and Methods

To analyze the labor data, the researchers created a merged dataset to link detailed work activities of various occupations to employment and earnings data. They used numerous data sources from the U.S. Department of Labor (O*Net and Occupational Employment Statistics) and the Census Bureau (American Community Survey) to compare rural and urban employment outcomes within Pennsylvania. They also surveyed sheltered workshop and other subminimum wage program operators to mea-



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The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created in 1987 under Act 16, the Rural Revitalization Act, to promote and

sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities.

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sure the ability of their workers to perform 41 work activities measured in O*Net. From these surveys, the researchers identified occupations in the competitive labor market that are most similar to the current work of employees of subminimum wage workers. They then analyzed these occupations in the current workforce dataset to better understand employment prospects, wage distributions, and other characteristics about these jobs.

They used four types of qualitative data collection methods to uncover the primary barriers to competitive work for people with disabilities: focus groups, individual interviews, surveys, and participant observations, stratified at the local, state and national levels.

At the local level, five focus groups were held in March and April 2017, encompassing a total of 34 participants from 30 agencies varying in size, services provided, and rural/urban coverage. To gather data from families of persons with disabilities, the researchers completed two focus groups and three individual interviews, collecting data from 17 family members.

For a state-wide perspective, the researchers conducted interviews with five individuals in state-level organizations or agencies involved with employment services for people with disabilities. The individuals represent various perspectives in policy making, thus bringing deep knowledge about the system and infrastructure needs.

For the analysis of the national context and identification of practices in other states, the research team participated in the annual conference of the American Congress of Community Supports and Employment Services (ACCSES), conducting participant observations during the conference and interviews with key informants, including an official from the U.S. Department of Labor on regulations, and leaders of provider and rehabilitation associations.

Results

The surveys of sheltered workshops and subminimum wage program providers identified 26 work activities that can be done by subminimum wage

workers with support. From this information, the researchers identified 95 occupations as being potential matches for subminimum wage workers. Laborers/movers, retail salespersons, and nursing/home health aides are three of these occupations with the highest current levels of employment.

An estimated 1.4 million Pennsylvania workers were employed in the 95 occupations from 2012-2015 (26.7 percent of the state's workforce). The most-frequently employed of these occupations are similar across urban and rural areas of Pennsylvania. Workers employed in these occupations tend to be younger, less educated, and earn lower wages compared to workers in other occupations. The results from the quantitative analysis point to a number of employment barriers in the 95 identified occupations for which subminimum wage workers are likely to compete, including higher levels of competition in rural areas, higher susceptibility to automation, lower pay, and lower expected job growth.

The qualitative analysis uncovered a number of time/benefit gaps that hinder employment. These include the benefit structure and the time frames involved for accessing job-related supports when moving to employment and reinstatement of other benefits when coming out of employment. The length of such gaps and the complicated processes related to benefits and employment serve as a disincentive for families, many of whom support the idea of competitive, integrated employment in principle, but feel that the potential risks are too high to pursue.

Three additional barriers were uncovered by the qualitative research. First, the transportation system available for persons with IDD in rural areas is designed for congregate care settings, and at this time, is not able to accommodate the needs of individuals seeking competitive, community-based employment. Second, the structure of the rate system for providers is not well-aligned to support competitive employment goals. Of particular concern is that the rates are insufficient to hire, train and maintain professional staff in the necessary employment and benefits services. Third, state agencies maintain separate data

management systems that do not permit cross-system access to data, system queries, and data management integration. Each limitation inhibits access to information on program effectiveness and the ability to monitor outcomes.

Policy Considerations

Based on the research results, the researchers offered the following policy considerations:

1.) Increase the flexibility of regulations. This includes greater flexibility in: regulations for benefits and supports for individuals with IDD; approval processes for authorizing services and/or a renewal of benefits when individuals with IDD leave employment; and facilitating the development of locally configured service hubs tailored to local assets and needs.

2.) Align funding rates with the goals of employment, and ensure that provider agencies receive adequate funding for professional staff with the appropriate training.

3.) Develop a mechanism for dealing directly with disproportionately high management salaries among some service agencies, rather than imposing a high level of regulatory compliance requirements on an entire system.

4.) Ensure that the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation receives adequate funding to complete authorization and approval processes in a timely fashion.

5.) Develop a system of transportation, similar to that created for medical appointments, to accommodate the flexible transportation needs for community-based employment.

6.) Increase cross-system collaboration among: i) the Rehabilitative Services Administration and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid systems at the federal level, ii) the Department of Labor and Vocational Rehabilitation Services in the Department of Education at the federal level; iii) the Office of Developmental Programs and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Bureau of Special Education

in the Department of Education at the state level; and iv) county government, local pre-voc providers, supports coordinators' agencies, local chambers of commerce, local economic development officials, and local educational institutions, at the local level.

7.) Reduce monitoring through documenting compliance with regulations, and increase focus on evaluation of outcomes.

8.) Set employment goals for employment rates of individuals with IDD that reflect the variations in the availability of jobs and the competition for those jobs in rural areas.

9.) Develop the data management capacities of state agencies that are needed to measure outcomes, and that allow data to be shared and evaluated across systems.

A copy of the research report, *Employment Opportunities for Rural Residents with Disabilities in Pennsylvania*, is available on the Center's website at www.rural.palegislature.us. The report includes an appendix on the top potential occupations for subminimum wage workers by 92 specific areas in Pennsylvania.

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