For Youth with Disabilities, Finding Help and Support After High School Can Be a Challenge

Youth with disabilities have access to a variety of services throughout their school years and as they transition to adulthood. These services include special education, transition supports, vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, and social and health services. After high school, however, these services can become fragmented and harder to access. Compared to youth without disabilities, research has shown that youth with disabilities may be less likely to continue with their education or pursue employment after high school. They may also reduce engagement in other disability service programs after they turn 18 or leave high school.

To successfully transition after high school, youth with disabilities may need help in navigating the complex world of adult disability services. A recent NIDILRR-funded study looked at how youth with disabilities engage with disability services during and after high school and whether a new program could help them better connect to key services in their community.

Researchers from the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment Policy and Measurement](#) looked at five Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) projects piloted in diverse areas in the US by the Social Security Administration (SSA). The purpose of these YTD projects was to provide services and supports to help youth with disabilities make successful transitions into adulthood. Two projects served large geographic areas (Colorado and West Virginia) and three projects served smaller, more

densely populated areas (Bronx and Erie Counties in New York and Miami-Dade County in Florida). In each project, youth were randomly assigned to either a control group or an intervention group. Control group youth received no additional services other than what was usually available. Intervention group youth were offered a broad array of services and supports aimed at helping youth find and keep a job in the community, such as job-training or volunteer experiences; empowerment activities such as self-determination or self-advocacy training; family support; and counseling about other services in the community. Some YTD projects worked with area schools and agencies, others offered stand-alone programs.

The researchers looked at survey data collected by SSA for those five YTD projects. Program participants were youth with disabilities who were eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and most participants were SSI benefit recipients. Both current high school students and post-high school youth were included. The researchers compared outcomes between the high school and post-high school youth in the control groups to look at how services change after high school. They also compared outcomes between the control and the intervention group youth one year after the projects began. Specifically, the researchers looked at the percentages of youth who were enrolled in school, working for pay, and receiving vocational services in each group.

The researchers found that most of the high school students in both the control groups and the intervention groups were receiving some type of vocational services while being enrolled in school. However, among the post-high school control group youth, many were not enrolled in school, working for pay, or receiving vocational services. For example, rates of postsecondary school enrollment ranged from 16% in the West

Virginia control group to 37% in the Miami-Dade control group, while post-high school employment rates ranged from 18% in the Miami-Dade control group to 45% in the Erie County control group. Finally, only 37% to 61% of post-high school control group youth were receiving vocational services.

While the interventions had little impact on high school youth, post-high school youth benefited from the YTD interventions. The strongest impacts were seen on employment and vocational service receipt. For example, in West Virginia, the employment rate was 44% for the intervention post-high school youth but only 25% for the control post-high school youth, and 67% of intervention youth received vocational services, compared with 37% of control youth.

According to the authors, the YTD interventions appeared to be instrumental in ensuring that both high school and post-high school youth had access to additional service providers, making it easier to access potentially underused services, and nearly doubling the number of providers used by youth in some areas. In all YTD projects, both high school and post-high school youth in the intervention groups worked with more service providers and accessed more educational and employment supports than youth in the control groups.

The authors also noted that the increase in provider usage for youth in intervention groups across projects underscored the demand for transition-related services in these communities. The YTD intervention also had greater impact on service use and employment for post-high school youth than their high school peers who participated in

the programs, indicating a stronger need for more coordinated services for post-high school youth with disabilities.

In future projects, researchers may want to examine how the network of providers changes after participants leave the YTD program and whether they continue to be active in employment and use of services such as VR. Finally, the authors brought attention to the limited role that VR may currently play in the transition from school to work for high school students with disabilities. They suggested that agencies and organizations may consider this need for services and develop programs to support youth with disabilities who are no longer part of the secondary education system.

To Learn More

Several NIDILRR grantees focus on successful transition of youth with disabilities. Their websites have extensive information on finding and keeping a job, transitioning to college, and more:

- The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood: http://www.umassmed.edu/transitionsrtc
- The RRTC on Vocational Rehabilitation Practices and Youth http://vrpracticesandyouth.org/
- The RRTC on Pathways to Positive Futures http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu
- The RRTC on Employment Outcomes for Individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired has a new curriculum targeted to students who are blind and making the transition from school to work: http://www.blind.msstate.edu/our-products/online-employment-preparation/

Think College.net offers information and resources for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) considering postsecondary education. It also offers the

only database of college programs geared specifically to students with I/DD. http://www.thinkcollege.net

The Social Security Administration completed pilot testing of the YTD projects. Learn more about the study: https://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/youth.htm

To Learn More About this Study:

Honeycutt, T. C., and Wittenburg, D. C., (2016) Connecting the dots: Provider networks of youth receiving Supplemental Security Income. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 44, 43-60. This article is available from NARIC under Accession Number J73074.