

# The Need for Employment Supports for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in North Carolina

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**S**upported Employment services began in North Carolina in the mid 1980s as a result of a systems change grant from the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS). At that time, an agreement was made between the North Carolina Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NCDVR) and the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services (DMHDDSAS) that stipulated that NCDVR would fund what is commonly termed within the field the "front end" of the service model—job development, job placement, training, and stabilization. DMHDDSAS would, in turn, fund the extended services after a successful job placement that would assure continued employment success. These services are typically referred to as long-term support (LTS). Over the years, North Carolina has been a leader in supported employment services and ranked third in the nation for meeting federal requirements for successful closures in 2006.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, North Carolina has struggled to create and maintain a consistent funding stream for the necessary and required extended LTS services that are critical for helping individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) maintain employment successes.

## Supported Employment Defined

Supported employment is, by definition, a work model that assumes that all individuals, regardless of the nature or extent of their disabilities, should have the opportunity and support to work in the community. No prerequisite skills are required for community job success. The model stipulates that individuals do not necessarily have to be "work ready," but rather the goal is to locate and/or modify meaningful jobs in the community and provide training and supports at the job site.<sup>2</sup> The 1986 reauthorization of the Rehabilitation

Act of 1973 (PL 99-506) defines the term "supported employment" within the federal guidelines as:

*...competitive work in integrated settings (A) for individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred, or (B) for individuals for whom competitive employment has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of a severe disability, and who, because of their handicap, need ongoing support services to perform such work.*

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## The Stages of Supported Employment

Within the supported employment service approach, the employment specialist, once referred to as the job coach, is responsible for assisting the consumer in locating a job and preparing for the interview, and then providing on-the-job training to the degree necessary to assure a successful employment outcome. Once the employment specialist determines that both the consumer and the employer are satisfied with the job placement, the goal of transitioning into the extended phase of supported employment begins. This phase is commonly referred to as extended services, or long-term support. For persons with I/DD this is more often than not the most critical phase for job retention. It is at this stage that individuals tend to lose their jobs not because of an inability to perform the tasks, but instead due to changes in work routines or supervisors or because

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of difficult interactions with coworkers. The difficulty may also be personal, such as financial hardship. Despite the importance of LTS, this area of supported employment has received little attention.<sup>3</sup>

In North Carolina, as in most other states, the majority of supported employment services are funded first by NCDVR, which pays for job assessment, job development, and the initial job training that occurs on the job site. NCDVR does not hire and/or manage employment specialists directly, but rather contracts with over 100 nationally accredited community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) to provide supported employment services in North Carolina. NCDVR and its partner agencies provide services that support people with I/DD in their efforts to obtain meaningful work, with the goal of supporting people in competitive employment. Through its partnerships with these community rehabilitation programs, NCDVR is able to provide customized employment assessments and assist individuals with the most significant disabling conditions find competitive employment in the workforce.

### The Elements of Long-Term Support Services

Once an individual is able to complete his or her job under the conditions of the work environment, as previously mentioned, he or she moves into the LTS phase of supported employment. The intended goal of LTS is to assist the worker in the identification and provision of supports and extended services necessary to maintain and enhance the person's position as a member of the workforce. The employment specialist may:

- Monitor work performance including work quality and work rate.
- Facilitate job changes and career advancement.
- Provide crisis intervention.
- Monitor socialization and overall integration into the work culture.
- Support training for the employer and/or coworkers.
- Retrain previously learned skills.
- Train the worker on new job skills added to the position.
- Assess the worker's job satisfaction.
- Assist the worker with changes in benefits resultant from wages earned.
- Assess the supervisor's/employer's satisfaction with the worker.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 80% of the funding received by DVR is federal; thus, federal regulations determine which vocational rehabilitation services can be funded. Federal regulations clearly state that the funds received for supported employment services cannot be provided longer than 18 months unless under special circumstances. Furthermore, such funds cannot be used to support "extended services" after the individual has made the transition from state vocational rehabilitation agency support.<sup>5</sup>

As previously mentioned, DMHDDSAS has had the role of funding long-term support services since the inception of supported employment within North Carolina. Typically these services have been funded through a variety of sources, including but not limited to the Community Alternatives Program for Persons with Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities (CAP-MR/DD) waiver and ADVP state funds. Funds are administered by Local Management Entities (LMEs) and their provider network. LMEs are county-led governing agencies charged with the oversight of human services provided at the local community level. They administer funds allocated from DMHDDSAS and subsequently contract for service provision through private providers. Providers of supported employment services in North Carolina have long complained of inconsistency in funding LTS, and, in some cases, no funding at all.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to January 2003, the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services did not have dedicated funding for long-term support services. Funding streams were mixed within supported employment service definitions and often created confusion and difficulty in tracking actual expenditures of long-term support services. Following the creation of a dedicated service definition for LTS (DMHDDSAS Long-Term Vocational Support Services—Extended Services), grassroots efforts from provider organizations and consumers were successful in lobbying the North Carolina General Assembly to obtain an appropriation toward this service in the amount of \$1.5 million during the 2005 legislative session. In the 2006 session, another \$2.5 million was obtained for a total of \$4 million dedicated to LTS for those individuals meeting eligibility criteria within the mental health system. Since that time, distribution of these funds to providers offering long-term support services has been an ongoing concern amongst all stakeholders involved within the supported employment arena. As noted in the May 2009 NCIOM Task Force Report, *Successful Transitions for People with Developmental Disabilities*, "while DMHDDSAS had \$4 million appropriated for this purpose, the LMEs only spent \$2 million in SFY 2008 for 'long-term vocational supports.'"<sup>7</sup> With the tremendous need for long-term support services and the scrambling for funds that has occurred over the years, North Carolina cannot afford to have funds appropriated for this purpose that are not fully maximized.

North Carolina has been a national leader in the supported employment arena, with the number of job placements averaging approximately 1,000 persons annually. For North Carolina to continue to be a leader in the provision and advancement of employment options for individuals with I/DD, a solution to the lack of and/or inconsistency of long-term support funding must be found. The joint supported employment services of vocational training and long-term supports suffer due to a lack of seamless service delivery. Nationally and in North Carolina, a significant barrier to the

seamless delivery of supported employment has long been its multiple funding sources and a service delivery model which is responsible to separate divisions of government.<sup>8</sup> To further the complexity of this system within North Carolina is the involvement of the LMEs, which all have their own way of conducting business within their catchment areas around the state. This funding system naturally evolved in response to the restriction that federal vocational rehabilitation funds may not be expended for extended services beyond the successful supported employment closure. Many states around the country complain of similar situations whereby long-term support funding is hampered in reaching providers of such services. At least one state has used an alternative means of long-term support funding where the state vocational rehabilitation program administers state funds and utilizes their vendor network.<sup>9</sup> Whether the state has seen greater success utilizing this method has not been reviewed for this commentary.

The funding system that would work best for North Carolina, one that enhances the delivery and subsequent funding for long-term support services, has yet to be

developed much less implemented. It is apparent that the system North Carolina has utilized for years has struggled to provide consistent funding to meet the needs of the supported employment program. For North Carolina to truly embrace an "Employment First" philosophy as proposed within the DMHDDSAS strategic plan for 2007-2010 and to continue to add 1,000 plus new individuals to supported employment jobs each year, there must be a statewide, seamless, designated, and protected funding stream for the long-term support services that are essential to the success of supported employment. There must be future efforts to study best practices around the country in the effective administration of long-term support funding and incorporate those practices in an effort to promote a better system within North Carolina. There is too much to lose in not pursuing this path. Individuals with I/DD deserve the opportunity to not only secure satisfying jobs, but also to have those supports necessary to maintain and grow within those jobs, thereby enhancing their lives through work. As the saying goes, there is dignity in work. **NCMJ**

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