

# IMPACT OF COVID-19

## Understanding the Effects of COVID-19 on the Six Partnerships in Employment States Working to Improve Employment Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults with I/DD

By The Lewin Group, National Evaluator for the PIE Systems Change Project

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### What is the PIE project?

The Administration for Community Living's Administration on Disabilities' PIE grant, a five-year federal grant under the Projects of National Significance, provided funding to six grantees in 2011 in California, Iowa, Missouri, Mississippi, New York, and Wisconsin; two grantees in 2012 in Alaska and Tennessee; and six grantees in 2016 in District of Columbia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Utah.

These grants prioritize competitive, integrated employment (CIE) for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Grantees partner with state agencies and stakeholders to form a consortium that develops and conducts initiatives designed to improve employment outcomes, expand CIE, and strengthen statewide systems for youth and young adults with I/DD.

**This brief focuses on the impact of COVID-19 from March 2020 to March 2021 in the six states awarded the PIE grant in 2016.** Throughout this brief, "states" refers to PIE grantees.

- Utilized Charting the LifeCourse tools to increase person-centered planning
- Engaged thousands of self-advocates, family members, businesses, schools, policymakers, and other stakeholders to support disability advocacy


### How does COVID-19 impact the employment of people with I/DD?

COVID-19 began its spread in the U.S. in early 2020. People with disabilities are not only at higher risk of adverse outcomes due to COVID-19,<sup>1</sup> they also experience job vulnerability at a higher rate than their non-disabled peers. In 2019, the labor force participation rate neared two in 10 for people with disabilities, compared to seven in 10 people without disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, one in five workers with disabilities lost their employment during the pandemic, compared to one in seven workers without disabilities.<sup>3</sup> This statistic demonstrates the pandemic's detrimental impact on opportunities for employment, especially among individuals with disabilities.

**1,000,000 jobs lost in the disability community nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>**

### Who are the 2016 PIE states?

[District of Columbia](#) 

[Hawaii](#)  
[Kentucky](#) 

[Massachusetts](#) 

[South Carolina](#)  
[Utah](#) 

### How has the PIE project made a difference so far?

The 2016 states have achieved a variety of outcomes thus far in the PIE grant. Some of the top highlights include:

- Supported over 100 students in achieving CIE or other paid work-based experiences
- Hosted or participated in hundreds of trainings
- Supported Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts for people with I/DD
- Developed alternative certificates, credentials, and Individualized Education Programs to support educational attainment

### How does COVID-19 impact the work of PIE states?

All six PIE states report varying experiences in executing project activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. State agencies and PIE consortia face unprecedented decision-making during the pandemic, such as transitioning in-person activities to virtual events. States also have to consider how COVID-19 impacts employment and day services, trainings and other in-person events, school schedules and programming, and long-term sustainability plans for the grant's ending in September 2021.

## Impact of COVID-19 on the PIE Project

While each state experiences its own unique set of impacts from the pandemic, all share similar challenges:

- Shifts in **priorities across agencies**, including changes in staffing, causing disconnect across partners;
- Changes in **budget priorities**, which impact short-term activities and long-term funding opportunities post-PIE;
- Access to **technology and virtual supports**, most notably for students with significant disabilities;
- Access to **career and technical education** and other transition services with uncertainties around post-secondary programming;
- Impacts on **legislative sessions**, particularly for states with employment-related legislation in progress;
- Changes to **provider payments** and the Medicaid payment system, which may depend on whether providers deliver services in-person or virtually; and
- Effects on overall PIE project **momentum** as the grant nears its final months.

### How has COVID-19 impacted employment in the PIE states?

In addition to general concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on PIE activities, states have employment-specific concerns. First, in-person work-based learning experiences may be limited or unavailable, impacting the criteria for obtaining alternative certificates. Second, several Vocational Rehabilitation agencies and providers recommend that individuals with I/DD not work in-person during the public health emergency (PHE). States raised concerns that this suggestion may take autonomy away from the individual.

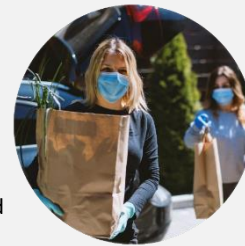
Despite these challenges, states also expressed common employment-specific opportunities. Teams recognized that stay-at-home orders present a unique opportunity for providers and parents to collaboratively prepare for employment at home. This is facilitated through technical assistance, including trainings for parents. In addition, at least half of the PIE states indicated interest in permanently integrating the modifications they made to PIE project activities during COVID-19, such as holding certain trainings or meetings online. Finally, many states reported that youth and young adults with I/DD maintained or even gained employment during the pandemic; possibly related to a sudden demand for essential workers.

1. [“The Forgotten Impact of COVID-19 on People with Disabilities.”](#)
2. [“Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics Summary.”](#)
3. [“Workers with Disabilities Disproportionately Impacted by COVID-19 Pandemic.”](#)
4. [“COVID Recession Hits Workers with Disabilities Harder.”](#)

If you have any questions or would like more information related to PIE, reach out to The Lewin Group team at [PIE-EVAL@Lewin.com](mailto:PIE-EVAL@Lewin.com).

### COVID-19 Spotlight SOUTH CAROLINA

During the pandemic, a student involved in South Carolina's PIE activities gained employment at a local grocery store. The store manager, who said he normally would not have thought to hire someone with a disability, was so pleased with the student's performance that he partnered with the state Vocational Rehabilitation agency to hire more people with disabilities in the future.



### What are the PIE states doing about these challenges?

The states undoubtedly experienced setbacks to their grant activities, but still found ways to mitigate these challenges and continue working towards PIE goals. For example, when the pandemic started, states prioritized outreach to individuals and families and developed virtual materials and trainings. Some state-specific examples include:

- **District of Columbia** held a [virtual webinar series](#) for families that included virtual employment strategies;
- **Hawaii** developed a *Safe Shopping Initiative* to link employers to individuals with I/DD to fill essential worker roles;
- **Kentucky** funded remote services, including for providers supporting people with I/DD virtually;
- **Massachusetts** leveraged technical assistance for virtual engagement best practices and ensured funding for remote services;
- **South Carolina** adapted disability benefits and employment workshops and employer trainings to a virtual environment; and
- **Utah** provided COVID-19 trainings for families and partnered with providers to broadcast the trainings.

COVID-19 has led states to think creatively and engage stakeholders in unprecedented ways. While the pandemic certainly impacts how youth and young adults achieve employment, the way the PIE states have been able to respond so far shows signs of a promising “new normal.”

### COVID-19 Resources

The **Administration on Community Living (ACL)** published resources on health and safety and virtual engagement amid COVID-19. Visit the [ACL COVID-19](#) page to access these materials.

The **Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI)** created a bundle of COVID-19 resources designed for a variety of audiences. Visit the [ICICovid-19 Publications and Resources](#) page to access these resources.

The **Association of University Centers on Disability** released a [March 2021 report](#) on the pandemic's impact on people with disabilities that outlines community responses and future considerations.

### What are state governments doing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

As of March 2021, the COVID-19 PHE has continued for over a year and impacts individuals with I/DD's ability to access caregivers, service providers, schooling, work experiences, and other services and supports. In addition to the project-specific challenges outlined above, states have been actively accommodating state-specific policy changes in response to the COVID-19 PHE. This includes statewide declarations of emergency, school and business closures, caps on in-person events or meetings, other restrictions, and policy-level responses. Additionally, priorities in state budgets and agency agendas have shifted to emergency response and safety measures, often impacting programming and funding opportunities for individuals with I/DD.

While each PIE state continues to advocate for the communities they serve throughout the pandemic, it is important to highlight the circumstances in which each project team is working in their respective states. This portion of the brief outlines the policy changes and major activities that occurred in each state throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Some key federal developments throughout the PHE include:

- **March 13, 2020** – COVID-19 declared a national emergency in the U.S.
- **March 26, 2020** – [CARES Act](#) signed into law, expanding unemployment benefits and providing direct payments; did not include adult dependents, many of whom are individuals with I/DD
- **June 10, 2020** – U.S. surpassed 100,000 deaths and over 2 million cases
- **November 4, 2020** – U.S. reported 100,000 new COVID-19 cases in one day for the first time
- **December 11-18, 2020** – Pfizer and Moderna vaccines FDA-approved for distribution and use
- **March 11, 2021** – [American Rescue Plan Act](#) signed into law, expanding unemployment benefits and providing direct payments, still excluding adult dependents but including [SSI and SSDI](#) recipients

#### District of Columbia

On March 11, 2020, DC declared a state of emergency. The Mayor issued a stay-at-home order on March 30, 2020, and banned gatherings of 10 people or more. Schools, restaurants, and non-essential retail were also closed shortly after. Schools across the District were closed through the end of the 2019-2020 school year and ended three weeks early. By the end of May 2020, DC's stay-at-home order was lifted, signaling Phase One of reopening. Shortly after, on June 22, 2020, DC entered [Phase Two](#) of the reopening plan and remain in this phase to date.

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On July 30, 2020, the Mayor announced that DC public schools would remain virtual through at least November 6, 2020. Students were given the option to attend school in person beginning February 2, 2021. By the end of February 2021, DC received thousands of vaccines and began distribution. As of March 15, 2021, DC has administered upwards of 230,000 total doses, with about 7% of residents fully vaccinated. Individuals with I/DD were among the first groups eligible for vaccination. The DC Department of Disability Services continued to operate virtually and provide essential services for individuals with I/DD. [Click here](#) for more information about DC's COVID-19 response.

#### Hawaii

The Governor of Hawaii declared a state of emergency on March 4, 2020, and issued a stay-at-home order on March 25, 2020. While schools closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, by the end of May 2020, the stay-at-home order was lifted. In July 2020, Hawaii was among the 10 states reporting new record daily totals of COVID-19 cases. Hawaii also ranks among the highest unemployment rates in the nation; the PHE exacerbated these conditions. In December 2020, the Governor [announced](#) that furloughs may occur as often as every two days starting in 2021. While a stimulus package delayed these furloughs, the state Department of Education, Department of Developmental Disabilities, and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation experienced slowed operations, and special education supports, including funding, have been stagnant. Vaccine distribution is a core component as the state continues to navigate reopening. As of March 2021, Hawaii has administered around 520,000 vaccine doses. Individuals with I/DD are a part of the group most recently made eligible to make an appointment. [Click here](#) for more information about Hawaii's COVID-19 response.

#### Kentucky

The Governor of Kentucky declared a state of emergency on March 6, 2020, and issued a stay-at-home advisory on March 26, 2020, called "[Healthy at Home](#)." The Governor also issued several Executive Orders related to mask wearing, the number of people permitted at gatherings, and public health precautions in schools. On February 23, 2021, the Governor signed [Executive Order 2021-120](#) that encouraged all school districts (including public and private schools) to offer or expand some form of in-person instruction by March 1, 2021. Ultimately, decision-making on in-person instruction is made at the district-level, and several districts have opted for in-person learning due to concerns with accessibility, including to the internet. To support reopening and new procedures, the Kentucky Department of Education developed [resources pages](#) specific to individuals with I/DD. The Governor's office is



encouraging vaccination in conjunction with school re-openings where possible to mitigate as much risk as possible. Similar to other states, individuals with I/DD were among the first groups of those eligible to receive the vaccine. To date, Kentucky has vaccinated over 1.2 million residents. [Click here](#) for more information about Kentucky's COVID-19 response.

## Massachusetts

The Governor of Massachusetts declared a state of emergency on March 10, 2020, and issued a stay-at-home advisory on March 24, 2020. When the advisory expired on May 18, 2020, the Governor issued a "[Safer at Home](#)" advisory, and released the state's [reopening plans](#). Similar to Kentucky, the Governor issued various Executive Orders related to mask requirements, gatherings, and capacity limits in public places. As the reopening plan continued, school districts made decisions about in-person instruction. As of March 2021, [more than half](#) of Massachusetts' school districts were engaged in a hybrid (i.e., in-person and virtual) learning model. The state also maintained a "[Return-to-School](#)" [working group](#) to support the state's school restart and recovery plan. As information changed rapidly, several disability-focused agencies and organizations developed comprehensive [resource pages](#) for individuals with I/DD and their families to navigate pandemic-related information like reimbursement and vaccine updates. On March 11, 2021, all K-12 educators and staff [became eligible](#) to schedule vaccine appointments. [Click here](#) for more information about Massachusetts's COVID-19 response.

## South Carolina

The Governor of South Carolina declared a state of emergency on March 13, 2020, and issued a stay-at-home order on April 7, 2020. In May 2020, the Governor created the group "[accelerateSC](#)" to support reopening efforts. By July 2020, South Carolina had one of the highest rates of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents. The Governor signed various Executive Orders to extend the state of emergency, encourage mask mandates, and adjust COVID-19 emergency measures. To supplement the policy changes, organizations like Able SC developed [plain-language guides](#), a [COVID-19 Kit](#), and maintained a [COVID-19 Resource Library](#). Most agencies and organizations remain virtual, but continue to provide and coordinate virtual services and supports, such as providing durable medical equipment and virtual youth support services. In January 2021, South Carolinians aged 70 or older became the first group eligible to schedule a vaccine appointment. As of March 2021, anyone in the state considered high risk (e.g., individuals with I/DD, frontline workers) is eligible to make an appointment. [Click here](#) for more information about South Carolina's COVID-19 response.

## Utah

The Governor of Utah declared a state of emergency on March 6, 2020. Stay-at-home orders were issued regionally. The Governor updated the "[Utah Leads Together](#)" plan in April 2020, which included the framework for reopening the state. Utah's Governor issued various Executive Orders to respond to the PHE, including requiring face covering requirements in public areas, schools, or state facilities, and expanding access to telehealth services. The state used color codes to classify a county's public health risk status and related guidelines. For example, a county classified as yellow would be instructed to comply with the guidelines outlined in the low risk category, including school reopening recommendations. The state also developed a K-12 [school manual](#) with public health recommendations. State agencies like the Department of Human Services compiled COVID-19 [information and resources](#) for individuals with I/DD. As of March 24, 2021, any individual aged 16 or older is eligible to register for a vaccine appointment, making individuals with I/DD eligible for a vaccine. [Click here](#) for more information about Utah's COVID-19 response.

## **Moving forward amid a persistent pandemic**

It became increasingly evident that COVID-19 would linger as the nation reached the one-year mark of its presence. While agencies worked to ensure continuity of access to supports and care, school closures and in-person restrictions across each of the states made trainings, events, and other experience-based employment activities challenging. Additionally, several states reported fewer grant or other state and federal disability-focused funding opportunities available to them due to the PHE. PIE project teams continue to respond to these changes in their states and offer a wide range of COVID-19 resources, virtual programming, and accommodations for employment activities. While the future is uncertain, states remain hopeful that employment priorities will come to fruition due to the strong partnerships built with state agencies and organizations throughout the PIE grant.

As vaccinations become a priority across the country, individuals with I/DD and their families should continue to review eligibility requirements in their counties and states. The [COVID-19 Vaccine Prioritization Dashboard](#) is a helpful tool that outlines vaccine prioritization plans across the U.S. for individuals with disabilities.

### Other Sources:

- ["U.S. State and Local Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic."](#)
- ["A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020."](#)
- ["Timeline: 1 Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic in DC, Maryland and Virginia."](#)
- ["COVID-19 Pandemic and People with Disabilities."](#)

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