

# YES! Youth Employment Solutions Center

## *Engaging Families in Employment System Change: Lessons from Partnerships in Employment States*

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## Introduction

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Employment First and customized employment represent two important reasons why momentum is building to improve competitive integrated employment (CIE) outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. Despite these advances, families are often left out of the communication loop and feel unsupported. This results in limited options for employment and lowered expectations that a real job in the community is possible. However, we know that families are energized and hopeful when presented with examples of employment success and are vital partners in the success of employment efforts.

The following technical brief highlights creative strategies for engaging and informing families undertaken by six Partnerships in Employment (PIE) state projects from 2017 to 2021. Each PIE state approached the issue of improving family engagement in a different way, building on existing partnerships and resources when available. Their work provides educators, employment services staff, policy makers and families with a direction for future work.

### What is the PIE Project?

The Administration for Community Living's Administration on Disabilities' *Partnerships in Employment (PIE) Systems Change* grant, a five-year federal grant under the Projects of National Significance. The PIE program 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.

### **2016 PIE State Projects included:**

- District of Columbia – [DC Learners and Earners](#)
- Hawaii – [Hawaii Jobs Now Partnership](#)
- Kentucky – [KentuckyWorks](#)
- Massachusetts – [Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment](#)
- South Carolina – [SC Employment First Initiative](#)
- Utah – [Initiative Utah School to Work](#)

# Successful Strategies for Improving Family Engagement in School-to-Transition Planning for Youth & Young Adults with I/DD

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## District of Columbia: Building Family Trust

Equitable access to information and resources has long been a challenge when it comes to engaging families in education and employment. Families who have financial resources or who are experienced in navigating “systems” often are the ones who receive services and advocacy support. In the District of Columbia, this imbalance in access led to families being skeptical that services were available or helpful to them.

DC Learners and Earners recognized this trend and took the bold step to focus their family engagement efforts on rebuilding trust and connections in the community. Project Manager Montrel Tennessee reflects, “Change was not going to happen unless we rebuilt trust with individuals and families. There is a strong commitment from our organization (DC Department on Disability Services) that we need to avoid making assumptions about what people want or need. We always want to ask, even if we don’t like the answer.” This meant creating feedback loops with existing family support bodies, such as the appointed Family Support Council and Supporting Families Community of Practice, while also making a commitment to practices that are person- centered and culturally and linguistically competent.

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“Our project has allowed us to be seen as a partner and liaison with families and DDS programs. Families now see us as a resource,” states Rebecca Salon, Project Director. Community-based activities have included *People Planning Together for Employment* sessions in the schools, a webinar series that empowered families to play a role in their family member’s employment success, and families being trained as LifeCourse Ambassadors so they can be mentors to others. Salon says, “This has been a bottom-up, top-down effort. Families wanted to be part of the solution and policy makers were committed to rebuilding trust.”

## Hawaii: Empowering Families with a New Vision

The “transition cliff” is an unfortunate reality for many families and students with disabilities. It is best described as families realizing they and their loved one are disconnected from needed supports and unprepared for life after formal education services end. The Hawaii Jobs Now Partnership saw

a trend when speaking to families. “Transitioning to adult life became a shock to many of our young people with disabilities. Many said they were getting information too late,” states Andrea Alexander, Project Coordinator.

A key challenge in Hawaii are issues of communication and lack of a formal structure to provide families of students with disabilities with clear and accurate information. This leads to low participation in employment services and a lack of awareness of options and available supports. To address this challenge, the project created a transition toolkit for families that provides timely information and a clear common goal – employment success for all students.

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Alexander reflects, “With the toolkit, we wanted to emphasize the importance of the IEP in the transition process and provide new tools to families, such as worksheets and profiles, so they can understand the connection between school and work and strengthen their voice in transition planning.” The language and imagery used

in the toolkit match the unique culture of the Hawaiian Islands. Plans include using the toolkit to develop topical trainings for families and professionals.

## **Kentucky: Improving Access to Information**

“It is like drinking from a firehose,” is an analogy used often in situations where families are presented with too many disjointed pieces of information on transition and employment all at once and become overwhelmed. Despite many sources of information in Kentucky, the staff of KentuckyWorks were seeing families of students with disabilities having a difficult time envisioning employment as possible and having limited support to see a different future. To address this issue, KentuckyWorks focused energy on building a website that features information on transition and employment that is intuitive and broken down into easily digestible and relatable chunks.

Project staff Stephanie Meredith used her lived experience as a parent of a young adult with disabilities to connect the family experience to the resources created. “We wanted to offer information to families in such a way that makes it easier for them to access and understand. Doing so helps people who are at different points in the journey,” said Meredith. Great examples of this strategy are the checklists, Info Graphics, employment success stories, Vision Statement, and Family Engagement modules that are available on the KentuckyWorks website (<https://kentuckyworks.org/>). Meredith shares, “Our focus has been on raising expectations across

the age groups and offering action items for families so they can truly be a partner in the employment success of their family member.”

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Dr. Harold Kleinert, Professor Emeritus at the University of Kentucky and KentuckyWorks staff says their family engagement efforts have been impactful. One unique aspect has been the effort to reach families of early childhood youth.

“Connecting to families of younger kids was something we cared about. Our emphasis on early childhood and linking those families to employment concepts has been a unique feature,” stated Kleinert. From developing training for professionals on building partnerships with families to embedding family engagement strategies into statewide transition programming, KentuckyWorks has done an admirable job keeping the needs of families at the core of project activities.

## Massachusetts: Raising Expectations through Parent Training

The Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment (MPTE) recognized the vital role of family engagement early on and designated a workgroup to identify and address issues related to families and employment. The group found that some families had low expectations for CIE for their family member with a disability, while others had higher expectations but were struggling to navigate overly complex service systems. “Family engagement and expectations around employment were inconsistent,” reports Jennifer Sulewski, Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, who provided technical assistance to the family engagement workgroup. “We have a lot of excellent advocacy resources for families, but they tended not to address employment. The state needed a way to empower families and have them be more connected to the process.”

To address this need MPTE envisioned a suite of parent training resources that could be utilized by advocacy organizations, schools, and employment agencies to have better conversations with families around employment. In addition, the project wanted to use the [Charting the LifeCourse](#) framework to help families envision better futures for their loved ones. The result was a two-tiered curriculum created by local parent advocates and transition experts. The first tier is a video-based session where families watch short clips and are then engaged in processing through discussion questions. The second tier is longer and designed to dig deeper into how families can support employment success. “We had robust participation of families and advocates in the development of these modules. That helped us stay grounded in the real issues families are experiencing,” described Sulewski.

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the training modules and corresponding train the trainer activities had to be piloted virtually. The sessions were well received by families and professionals alike. MPTE has plans to translate the sessions in Spanish and hopes the model will be used again to address other need areas such as benefits planning and the family role in employment systems change.

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## South Carolina: Disability Benefits and Employment Workshops

The [Social Security Administration](#) (SSA) reported in 2019 that there were over 12 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 64 who received Social Security benefits based on their disability. Over 3 million received Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Securing SSI benefits can be a difficult and confusing process for families of individuals with disabilities. Many believe that SSI benefits are the only option for income for people with significant disabilities and that competitive employment is not a possibility. This is a common phenomenon observed by Sandy Jordan, Project Director for South Carolina’s Employment First Initiative and Director of Employment Programs at ABLE South Carolina. “We were running into families who were hesitant to consider competitive employment because their family member was on disability benefits. We wanted to use project funds to provide accurate information on benefits so people can make informed choices.”

[Hire Me SC](#) set an ambitious goal of providing eight to ten in-person disability benefits workshops a year for families in South Carolina. The sessions were led by a Certified Work Incentives Counselor (CWIC), some of whom used to be on Social Security benefits. “We were coming from the perspective of a person with a disability. Presenters shared personal stories and that gave families hope,” declared Jordan. The sessions also featured partner agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, who presented on their programs and resources.

The workshops had two main goals. The first was to address the common misunderstandings and widespread misinformation regarding the intersection of benefits and employment. Families were making employment decisions for their family member based on inaccurate information. This often led to an apprehension to consider employment as an option. The second goal was to promote collaboration among disability partner agencies so they could come together and dispel myths about their services. “It was important to have these workshops available regionally so families could come and connect with local service providers.” Says Jordan.

Ultimately, the Disability Benefits and Employment workshops were about empowering families and raising expectations, and Jordan feels that purpose was achieved. “The greatest impact has been connecting families to resources and seeing that work is possible. They see that employment is an option even if their family member is on benefits.”

## Utah: Engaging Families in the Employment Process

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“We can find a job for just about anyone, but if the family is not interested in employment, it’s not going to happen.” Kelie Hess with Utah State University and Project Coordinator for the Utah School to Work Project, offered this observation. Their project works to provide individualized student work experiences through several partner schools. They utilize customized employment to tailor opportunities for those with significant disabilities. After a slow start they realized that family buy in was a major contributor to project outcomes.

One challenge was that families had low expectations and a rigid idea of employment options. “We needed to show families how customized employment works and pair them with other families who have had a successful outcome. Once we did that, they seemed excited about employment being a possibility,” said Hess. The project also partnered with Utah’s Parent Training and Information center to host a “transition university” for families and created printed resources to help answer common questions.

However, the key to engaging families was to truly meet them where they were at and involve them in the customized employment process. This meant focusing on clear communication and holding regular employment planning meetings to address issues and listen to concerns. “The customized employment process can take a while, so clear communication helps families see value in each step of the steps we are taking with their student,” says Hess. In the end, this commitment to family involvement paid off. Hess reports, “I see a connection between our student successes and supportive and engaged families. It really is a major key to what we want to accomplish.”

## Policy and Practice Implications

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The strategies shared from the PIE state projects highlight the need for focused policy and practice changes to improve training, outreach, and partnerships with families around the employment process. Specific recommendations derived from PIE project activities include:

- Create feedback loops with families who use education and employment services, and use the information gathered to improve student preparation, family engagement, and employment service delivery.
- Invest in parent training and outreach specific to the intersection of Social Security benefits and competitive employment. This includes strengthening the capacity of Certified Work Incentives Counselors, Centers for Independent Living, and other advocacy agencies to provide real-time support to families so they can make informed employment decisions.
- Recognize that transition and employment information needs to get in the hands of families sooner than the high school years. For example, explore increasing the capacity of middle school special education programs to promote competitive employment as the preferred outcome of the transition years.
- Utilize and re-energize existing federally funded parent training projects, such as those funded by RSA and OSEP, to provide training, coaching, and advocacy support to families of youth with disabilities.
- Create opportunities for families to connect with each other around employment. For example, create and moderate a Facebook page for families on employment success. Families benefit from connecting with others who have had youth with successful employment outcomes.
- Invest in training for interagency school teams and adult employment agencies to partner with families during the customized employment process. Families bring so much to the table in terms of energy, reinforcing skill building and using personal networks.
- Create new models for reaching and supporting disconnected families, such as those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in the employment conversation. This will promote equal access to information and services.
- Position raising expectations of families as a funding, policy, and practice priority. This includes training for professionals on positive messaging and embracing Employment First as a guiding principle for decision-making.



## Summary

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The time has come to think beyond the traditional methods of engaging families of youth with disabilities around employment. While strategies like creating handouts, websites, and workshops are still effective, they represent only half the solution. We also need to offer opportunities for coaching families on the employment process and provide opportunities for families to ask questions and express concerns in a respectful space. In addition, professional capacity building should be implemented so educators and employment specialists can learn to build effective partnerships with families. The PIE states all focused some of their funding to offer creative solutions to issues they were seeing in their states, and in doing so provided strategies that can be used to improve practice a