**MEANINGFUL CAREERS COMMITTEE**
Meeting Minutes
December 12, 2023
2:00 – 3:30 P.M.
Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council
3839 North 3rd Street, Suite 306, Phoenix, Arizona 85012

A committee meeting of the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC) was convened virtually December 12, 2023. Notice having been duly given. Present were the following members of the Meaningful Careers Committee, guests, and staff.

| Committee Members Present | |
|---|---|
| Melissa Van Hook, Virtual | Nathan Pullen, Virtual |
| Monica Cooper, Virtual | |
| Erik Jensen, Virtual | |
| Kristen Mackey, Virtual | |

| Staff | Committee Members Absent |
|---|---|
| Jon Meyers, Executive Director, Virtual | J.J. Rico |
| Jason Snead, Research & Communications Specialist, Virtual | |
| Michael Leyva, Contracts/ Grants Coordinator, Virtual | |
| Ashley Alcaraz, ASU MSW Intern, Virtual | |

## A. Welcome & Introductions

Chairperson Melissa Van Hook welcomed everyone to the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC or Council) Meaningful Careers Committee meeting. The meeting was called to order at 2:08 pm. Roll call and participant introductions were completed.

## B. Review of March 28, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Melissa Van Hook asked members if they reviewed meeting minutes and if there were any corrections.

Motion to approve the minutes with the correction was made by Erik Jensen; seconded by Monica Cooper. The Motion carried.

## C. Review of Final Reports

Melissa Van Hook shared background on why ADDPC commissioned the two projects, which culminated in final reports from the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) and Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI). The CFA project is also referred to as Raising Expectations.

Focus has always been on the negative. This project was meant to hear from families, professionals, service providers on what is possible. ICI was selected to conduct the VR study based on their previous work with the Council, *The Power of Disability Employment*, which has been recognized as an excellent report and cited nationally on how raising the labor force of individuals with disabilities can make a positive impact on the state's economy.

Michael Leyva provided a summary of the reports.

***Communities at the Center: Increasing Access to College and Career for Young People with Disabilities***

The Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) worked on a yearlong community engagement project to bring awareness and change as well as help facilitate transition for young people with disabilities as they enter adulthood and begin to consider postsecondary education and career pathways. The goal of their yearlong project was to collect credible data to start conversations and bring awareness to the gaps and challenges to community leaders. As well as empower the opinions and voices of young people with disabilities and allow for solutions to be focused on starting at earlier ages to successfully identify what actions must be taken with more data, awareness, and resources. CFA produced a report focused on the results of research, community conservations and perspectives, and key takeaways from the project.

Research shows that in Arizona, young people with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll and obtain a degree in postsecondary education, and enter the workforce when compared to their peers without disabilities.

- In 2020, only 68 percent of students with disabilities graduated in 4 years, compared to 78 percent among all students statewide.
- In 2021, only 28 percent of 25–64-year-olds with disabilities had an associate degree or higher, compared with 44 percent of 25–64-year-olds without disabilities.
- Only 36 percent of working-age individuals (ages 16-64) with a disability were employed compared to 72 percent employment rate for working-age individuals without a disability.

The critical gaps and untapped potential among young people with disabilities in our state have a significant impact on the lives of young Arizonans and their families, as well as our state's collective success. Over the past year, CFA and Arizona Town Hall worked together to host a series of Community Conversations designed to:

- Bring trusted data to inform and prompt dialog around these issues.
- Engage cross-sector leaders to understand the challenges and opportunities for action.
- Amplify the voices of young people with disabilities and their families in generating solutions with a focus on starting the conversation at earlier ages.
- Identify where action can be taken through additional data, engagement, or resources.

Based on the review of research and literature and the perspectives and takeaways from Community Conversations held from February to September in 2023, the following challenges and opportunities for actions have surfaced. They are followed by recommendations.

- **Investment and support in K-12 Education**: Structural education opportunity gaps disproportionately affect youth with disabilities. More investment and support in special education with a focus on early career exploration and transition planning is needed.

  - Provide additional training and tools to teachers through pre-service and continuing education that allow them to engage with and champion young people more effectively with disabilities.
  - Identify and secure increased funding for special education staff to support young people with disabilities while also examining and improving systems for funding allocation.
  - Ensure educators are aware of the resources and support services available to parents through comprehensive public awareness, communications, and education campaigns.
  - Emphasize a strength-based discovery approach in K-12, which supports young people to uncover and develop their strengths, talents, and interests.
  - Ensure inclusive curriculum and support systems in postsecondary institutions and generate more awareness and stories of success for young people with disabilities to see themselves in higher education.

- **Early childhood and family support**: Families report challenges in navigating complex systems and messages about their child's health, educational journey, and future pathways. They need to relate to critical resources and a sense of possibility for the future.

  - Ensure parents are aware of the resources and support services available through greater coordination and communication among entities that provide services to families.
  - Invest in and expand training and education programs for parents in how to advocate for themselves and their children in ways that are culturally responsive.
  - Generate storytelling and communications strategies that provide positive messages and success stories for parents, from early diagnosis, that emphasize an asset-based approach to their child's journey.
  - Address gaps in education and awareness for parents, particularly regarding student transition plans, and proactively begin conversations earlier.

- **Career & Technical Education (CTE) and counseling**: More communication and access to apprenticeships and CTE programs are needed for students with disabilities, families, and educators with support from in-school counselors.

  - Address inequities in access to critical levers for postsecondary transition and career, such as CTE offerings.
  - Increase awareness and information about apprenticeship and CTE programs for students with disabilities, families, educators, and school leaders.

- o  Start career exploration and transition planning earlier throughout the K-12 continuum and engage the parents as key champions of their child's success.
- o  Increase investment in special education staff to provide equitable learning experiences and environments and a lower ratio of student-to-school counselors to provide career counseling and postsecondary engagement supports.

- **Evidence-driven and collaborative strategies**: More data is needed on programs that serve students with disabilities, as well as greater coordination, accountability, and communication across sectors, including education and nonprofit, as well as employers, government agencies, and service providers.

  - o  Build capacity to address socioeconomic barriers for youth with disabilities through a multi-sectoral approach including education, policy, business, and nonprofits.
  - o  Simultaneously focus on grassroots and grass-top approaches that engage communities locally while ensuring more systems-level action at regional and state levels-organizations like Grupo de Apoyo para Ninos Especiales (GANE) and the Community of Practice model in Pinal and Pima Counties are promising models for replication.
  - o  Collect data to identify trends and outcomes of students and youth with disabilities involved in programs and practices that promote postsecondary engagement. Data collection would encompass all stakeholders, including education professionals, school and district administrators, parents, and of course, the primary stakeholders: the students themselves.
  - o  Communicate data findings to a broad swath of stakeholders, including state, local, and school policymakers.
  - o  Drive greater awareness of how issues of systemic racism and economic inequality exacerbate inequitable outcomes for youth people with disabilities.

- **Career recruitment and workplace**: Youth with disabilities experience greater challenges during the career recruitment process, discriminatory hiring practices, and barriers to the workplace. Employers need to be reached with key information about the untapped potential that young people with disabilities bring to the workplace.

  - o  Invest in and expand employer education campaigns that help industries understand the untapped potential of young people with disabilities and how best to create inclusive, supportive environments for success.
  - o  Ensure communication methods are accessible for all individuals, including plain language, alt—text, Braille, audio, etc. Additionally, assistive technology, accessible entryway and bathrooms, and reasonable workplace accommodations should be adopted for an inclusive work environment.
  - o  Provide training to increase disability etiquette and address bias and discrimination of youth with disabilities in educational settings, youth development programs, and postsecondary engagement opportunities. Such training should be part of any initial

onboarding processes as well as embedded within ongoing professional development activities in pursuit of making the workplace inclusive.

These recommendations just begin to identify a path forward. They involve a cross-sector effort involving investment, policy change, and grassroots organizing and communication. Ultimately, we all need to work together to activate community-led solutions to ensure young people with disabilities have equitable access to opportunity in postsecondary and career pathways.

The Comprehensive Study of Arizona's Vocational Rehabilitation Program is a project that focused on determining the effectiveness of Arizona's Vocational Rehabilitation program. More specifically how and if this program is positively impacting transition-age youth with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities. The performance report for the study of Arizona's VR program was formulated by analyzing Arizona's VR services policies, Arizona's data regarding employment rates for transition-aged youth and conducting interviews and discussions with individuals who regularly meet the VR program or use the VR program.

Methodology

To understand the status of Arizona's VR efforts to support youth with I/DD to transition from school to employment, ADDPC contracted with the ICI to conduct an evaluation of Arizona's VR program. The goals were to understand:

- How well is Arizona's VR program performing in helping transition-age youth (ages 14-24) with I/DD obtain their employment goals? What are the key strengths and barriers to achieving successful outcomes for the VR program?
- Do disparities exist in employment outcomes by disability type, spoken language, and race/ethnicity? If so, what is the nature of the disparities and why do they exist?
- Are there specific services that move youth toward a path that led to successful outcomes?
- Are certain services more impactful than others? Are service trends emerging? Are there true success markers?
- What isn't working? Are there services that are not producing positive impacts?
- In reviewing VR's key performance indicators, what would be some measures to capture/demonstrate successful outcomes for transition-age youth with disabilities?

ICI collected findings from three main sources:

1. Reviewed Arizona policy documents that currently guide their VR services
2. Reviewed Arizona's data regarding employment outcomes for transition-age youth with disabilities and adults with I/DD, and
3. Conducted interviews and focus groups with individuals who were knowledgeable about Arizona VR, including VR staff at the state, regional, and local levels; staff from the Department of Education (ADE) and Department of Developmental Disabilities (DDD); local school districts, VR vendors; advocates, and youth and their families with I/DD who have received services from Arizona VR in the past three years.

Summary of partner group interviews

Partner Group          Number

Professionals              29
Individuals                 9
Family Members           18

Total Number of Interviews   56


Arizona landscape for Transition from School to Adulthood

Vocational Rehabilitation
- Prior to 2019 there had been a series of changes in senior VR leadership for many years. However, current VR program administration staff have been consistent for several years and have instituted significant improvements in policy and practice.
- VR is a member and provides substantial resources to support the Arizona First Partnership.
- In October 2018, the VR vendor system was overhauled to ensure that new vendors can quickly become approved. DES manages this process. Previously, vendors could only be added every five years and unable to adjust payment rates for services during that time.
- Disability Benefits 101 (DB101) is funded through VR. VR's support has ensured the long-term sustainability and improvements of this resource.

Division of Developmental Disabilities
- State agency responsible for administering and monitoring services to individuals with I/DD.
- Funding for DDD services passed through the state's Medicaid authority, AHCCCS.
- AHCCCS contracts with managed care organizations which in turn contract with a wide array of service vendors for employment services and supports.

Arizona Department of Education
- Administers the state's public pre-K education system.
- For students with disabilities, services fall under Exceptional Student Services (ESS). ESS works to ensure that the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requirements are met – for example, that students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment consistent with their needs.
- Regarding employment, IDEA also requires schools to include employment-related transition services in the individualized education plans (IEPs) of all students who have reached the age of 16.

Employment First
- Executive Order was signed in 2017.
- Employment First policies are recognized as a path toward greater community employment for people with I/DD.

- Anchor a service delivery system focusing on funding, resource allocation, training, with the overall objective of employment.
- Key areas of action focus on increasing CIE, increasing awareness and advocate for people with disabilities to work in the community, prepare youth for CIE, foster job creation, hiring, retention, promotion, and self-employment.

**Three Key Periods of Transition**

There are three key periods of the transition process from school to adulthood during which youth with I/DD explore and formulate goals for employment and take a series of actions to achieve their goals. These periods are:
1. Awareness building for employment and community living.
2. Career exploration, goal formation, formal career planning, job development, and postsecondary education planning
3. School exit to employment and/or postsecondary education

For each period, ICI described how Arizona's policy and practice structure supports the services that are offered, how partners experience the services, and how VR can improve the experience.

Pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) are the earliest opportunity (age 14+) that VR can engage with youth. Pre-ETS are workshops that cover five employment-related topics: Job Exploration, Post-Secondary Education/Training Counseling, Work Readiness (including social and independent living skills), Work-Based Learning, and Self-Advocacy Skills. Research found that Arizona contained 11 of 16 research-based transition recommendations, which was slightly more than the average. Additional strengths of the state's Pre-ETS model include:
- VR has a tab on their website for Pre-ETS.
- All youth with disabilities ages 14-22 are eligible for Pre-ETS regardless of the type of academic coursework they are pursuing. This includes youth who are enrolled in secondary, postsecondary, or another formal education setting.
- Youth can access any of the five Pre-ETS curricula as many times as needed between the ages of 14 and 22 if they are not accessed more than once annually.
- Pre-ETS are provided through contracts with vendors and through Transition School to Work contracted programs.
- Pre-ETS can be provided to individuals one on one or in a small group setting.

VR contracted Transition School to Work Programs are an important established opportunity for youth with I/DD. They represent the state's most significant and long-term effort to put best practices in place for the transition from school to adulthood. The contracts provide a structured set of vocational and independent living experiences for youth to become ready for careers and postsecondary education.

TSW facilitate a direct and strong connection to VR transition coordinators, local VR counselors, and resources for schools to establish best practices in the provision of transition services including resources to hire staff.

In one example, because of their school district's contract with VR and the matching TSW funds, the district had the financial resources to hire staff that outside of the school district's financial resources. At the time of this retirement, the program had four teach coordinators, 13 support staff, and served 200 students across four high schools in the school district. Another partner noted that VR TSW contracts offer regularly scheduled opportunities for VR counselors to work with youth during the school day and establish one on one relationships with the youth.

Unfortunately, most school districts in the state do not have a VR TSW program. In state fiscal year 2024, there are only 24 TSW programs. In all of Arizona's 236 public school districts (this does not include the 432 charter school districts and 23 other educational organizations.

There are 48 Recommendations.

### *Strengthen VR's Pre-ETS model*

- Provide plain language guidance to VR counselors, DDD case managers, vendors, schools, families that youth who are not in a TSW program or a VR client should request Pre-ETS as early as possible, preferably at age 14.
- Develop a method for assessing the impact of Pre-ETS on the long-term employment trajectory of youth with I/DD at the state or vendor level.
- Provide guidance to youth with I/DD who have been approved for Pre-ETS on how to select a service vendor to meet their needs. For example, VR could offer a list of questions to use when accessing Pre-ETS vendors.
- Provide guidance to VR counselors and vendors about how often youth can access any one type of Pre-ETS. This will clear up misconceptions that a youth can only access each service once prior to age 22.

### *VR's early career exploration, goal formation, formal career planning, job development, and postsecondary education planning*

- Resume publishing data on VR services and outcomes for transition age youth and continue making the data available in plain language and infographics.
- Develop and publish a list of VR TSW contracts, including school district location, number of youths participating, demographics of youth, and a description of each program's features. Use this data to encourage the expansion of schools with VR TSW contracts and ensure that growth is distributed across the state.
- Track and publish employment results that compare participants in VR TSW employment outcomes to non-TSW clients to document the importance of the program. Also track publish this data and share it school districts that do not have a VR TSW contract to ensure they regularly consider the impact that implementing a contract with VR could have on their students. Provide this information in infographic and plain language form and update the data at least annually on the VR website.
- Support VR transition staff and local level VR supervisors to strengthen connections with local schools, especially school administrators and school boards, to ensure they have the

knowledge needed to consider establishing a VR TSW contract or expanding an existing contract.

- There are 10 more recommendations for this section!

### *Improve school exit to employment and/or postsecondary education*

- "Build a Better VR consumer." Develop mechanisms for youth and families to be better informed about the wide variety of post-school outcomes and VR's role in supporting the outcomes. Youth and families need more information to advocate for the services that will help them meet their goals, and to know what VR is not able to support and what are some appropriate alternative resources. The hope is that this would reduce frustration and help make the employment process more efficient and effective.
- Develop an ad hoc committee under the existing IGA between VR and the Department of Education to assess how to improve the collaboration between schools and VR.
- Revise guidelines, time frames, and expectations, and address roles and responsibilities for youth, families, schools, VR, DDD, and vendors regarding what should be happening from middle school through school exit to ensure youth obtain high quality employment outcomes.
- Mandate that interagency planning begin at age 14 for all transition-age youth with disabilities, including I/DD enrolled in Arizona's public school system.
- VR, Department of Education, and DDD, through their existing IGAs and MOUs, should consider a long-range goal to share information through a common management information system for youth with I/DD at the age of 14.
- Youth with I/DD who are enrolled in private schools, homeschooled, and/or who do not want to receive services and support from VR and DDD represent a unique challenge during the transition period. Building relationships with youth and their families who are parts of these groups will need to be intentional and coordinated across multiple state agencies and partners. A first step would be to offer listening sessions across the state with a focus on areas that have a high proportion of individuals who are enrolled in private schools or who are homeschooled, and in areas where there are fewer referrals to VR and DDD to understand the current breadth and depth of individuals and their families' knowledge about the possibilities for adulthood and employment.

### *VR staff turnover and the impact on VR capacity*

- Provide additional guidance and support to local VR offices to ensure that VR counselor staff access the YesLMS leaning platform. This will improve VR counselors' skill related to understanding how employment related to each client's goals; how to use the available flexibilities in VR policy to provide personalized help to youth the I/DD reach their vocational goals; how to support individuals access other VR resources such as labor market information, assistive technology, and benefits management to facilitate better planning.  And informed decision making; and how to develop and implement IEPs that lead to interagency collaboration.

- VR counselors may also benefit from an evaluation of their time, prioritization, and/or skills in completing a comprehensive assessment of rehabilitation needs for each client they are assigned.
- There are many low-cost and remote professional development options available for VR staff.

*Capacity-building for VR vendors and VR counselors*

- Develop an ad hoc committee to assess how best to improve the knowledge and skills of VR counselors, TSW staff, and VR vendors related to individual supported employment services. Supported employment includes Customized Employment and Discovery, Progressive Employment, systematic instruction, and the Individualized Placement and Support model.

*Reinvigorate partner engagement*

- Arizona Employment First and its partners should review this report and identify recommendations that they can work with VR to facilitate. For example, several VR vendors are Employment First partners, they could support improvements by working together under Employment First to develop and pilot a feedback form for youth and families who participate in Pre-ETS that described the content the individual was exposed to and make formal recommendations for next steps on how to engage with VR to further the youths' goals.

Report identified proposed activities and timelines for the next 18 months (about one and half years) to begin specific actions. The timeline is divided into 4-month periods of time.

**Actions for Vocational Rehabilitation**
First 4 months
1. Review Report and identify key myths partners have about VR transition services.
2. Enter into agreement to pilot draft Customized Employment scope of work.
3. Begin planning a statewide training on supported and Customized Employment for VR staff and vendors.
4. Learn about existing Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) grantees and consider how Arizona VR could improve supported employment services by applying for future DIF grants.

Actions for Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Education, & Division of Developmental Disabilities
First 4 months
1. Review report and identify key myths partners have about interagency collaboration and services during transition.

Actions for Employment First
First 4 months
1. Review report and identify key myths partners have about transition services and VR, DDD, and education how they can support correcting these myths to the public.

Committee discussion centered on the following comments, ideas, and suggestions.

**Communities at the Center final report**

- How do we take all the recommendations into consideration.
- How do we get individuals and agencies to work together.
- Let's pull leadership from ADE, DDD, VR to help implement recommendations.
- Is the Center for the Future of Arizona able to help implement recommendations?
- Let's review the two final reports and identify where overlap occurs – the report identifies areas where the same individuals and agencies are doing the same work, goals are similar.
- One report backs up the other.
- Arizona Town Hall does a great job of transcribing discussion and idea and bring them to the larger group.
- Decision makers needs to see how we can work together. No finger pointing. Let's not work in silos.
- Can we obtain comparisons for national statistics? Would be helpful to see where Arizona stands in comparison to other states.
- Statistics can help us benchmark where we are and where we could and should be. Let's work with Karla Krivickas (consultant) and Ian Dowdy (CFA) on obtaining statistics and share data. We can use the data as a lens,

**Institute for Community Inclusion report**

- ADE is not sharing information on VR with clients as often as it should.
- Families often find out about VR from another parent.
- There is a great deal of misinformation that is disseminated by DDD staff.
- Often schools will not let VR into the schools.
- Is there a barrier for school districts about letting VR into the schools?
- Pre-ETS and Transition School to Work programs are effective. How can they be increased?
- How can we expand VR into more schools?
- Individuals are not receiving VR services as often as they should.
- Schools just want to graduate students and get kids out as quickly as possible.
- How can we bring the three entities (ADE, DDD, and VR) together to produce successful outcomes?
- Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities is working through Employment First to bring state agencies together.
- Employment First is working in a collaborative manner to bring common definitions, language, employment outcomes, etc. to agencies. Overall goal is to align language, so everyone understands what the expectations are.
- Transition Slide Guide has been a useful tool. It identifies roles and responsibility across the partners.
  Make the Transition Slide Guide a parent tool. This is how you use it, ask for services at the appropriate time and how to ask for services.
- There should be more education among VR counselors.
- Agency websites need to be simplified and made more accessible. There should be consistent information on websites.

- Parents in general need to be educated on VR. Make them better VR customers.
- VR is working on outreach and marketing. How can VR get information to individuals, families, schools, etc.
- We need to work on next steps. Talk to entities that are involved.
- Engage Employment First, ADE, DDD, and VR. What leverage does ADDPC have to make agencies actively participate?
- Ask agency leaders who they can assign to work on recommendations.
- Disseminate reports and follow up.

A motion was made to share Center for the Future of Arizona and Institute for Community Inclusion reports to agency leaders (ADE, DDD, VR, Employment First). ADDPC will follow up and ask agency leaders who they will appoint to sit on a work group to help develop a plan to implement recommendations. Motion was made by Monica Cooper; seconded by Erik Jenson. Motion carried.

## D. Call to the Public

No members of the Public were present.

## E. Adjourn

Chairperson Melissa Van Hook adjourned the Meaningful Careers Committee Meeting at 3:27 pm.

Dated this 16th day of January 2024
Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council