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Fiscal Year 2021 Progress Report on DDS Employment First Initiative

April 2021



Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services
Progress Report on Employment First Initiative
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Line Item 5920-2025 of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 General Appropriation Act requires the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to issue a report *to the house and senate committees on ways and means and the joint committee on children, families and persons with disabilities regarding: (i) eligible individuals who transitioned to community-based employment in fiscal year 2021 and those projected for fiscal year 2022; and (ii) the number and types of transitions funded by the pilot program since its inception, delineated by fiscal year.*

The Department of Developmental Services has been engaged in implementation of the Employment First Initiative since January 2014, as outlined in the “*Blueprint for Success: Employing Individuals with Disabilities with Intellectual Disabilities in Massachusetts.*” The Blueprint outlined a multi-year plan to phase out sheltered workshop services that ended on June 30, 2016. The Department successfully met this goal and transitioned approximately 3,000 individuals from sheltered workshops to individual or group-supported employment and/or Community-Based Day Support (CBDS) services.

This transition was facilitated in large part by increased budget allocations and pilot funding in FY2015 and FY2016. Since the closure of the workshops in FY2017, this funding has been annualized and integrated into the employment and day services account (5920-2025), maintaining the fiscal resources for the ongoing delivery of these program services.

This past year has been incredibly challenging for day and employment providers and the individuals and families they serve. In March 2020, on-site day programs were shut down as a result of the public health emergency to protect the health and safety of participants and providers, and were able to reopen in July under strict social distancing protocols. Workplaces also shut down or operated at reduced capacities during FY20 and FY21 which limited the number of individual and group-supported employment opportunities available. In addition, provider staffing challenges related to the pandemic, reduction in transportation services, and reluctance of individuals and their families to engage in-person services due to health/safety concerns, all impacted our system’s ability to provide these services during this reporting period.

Although challenging, the pandemic sparked incredible creativity, collaboration, and innovation in the DDS system. DDS worked in partnership with day program providers to accelerate and incentivize alternative day programming in virtual settings that supplemented and, in some cases, replaced, in-person day services. DDS implemented payment parity for in-person and virtual services, provided rate enhancements of nearly 300% to assist in the adoption of virtual service modalities during the spring of FY20 and summer of FY21 when day programs remained closed, and additional emergency rate enhancements in FY21 at 40% and 25%. Rate enhancements helped community providers continue to offer services virtually through the pandemic given low in-person utilization rates and supported increased costs related to public health guidance for the safety of participants when programs were allowed to reopen. These actions supported and stabilized DDS day program providers, despite the reductions in service provision as a result of program closures, and led to advances in virtual programming options that will remain available moving forward.

Additional Highlights of FY21:

- (i) 3,930 individuals participated in Individual Integrated Employment and over 7,500 in Community-Based Day Supports (CBDS). Although enrollment numbers have fluctuated slightly over the past year, it is expected that a similar number of adults will transition to these services in FY2022.
- (ii) The following chart highlights the number of Individuals enrolled in Employment and Day Services from 2015 to present:

Service Type	June 2015	June 2016	June 2017	October 2018	October 2019	October 2020	March 2021
Individual Supported Employment	2,900	3,146	3,388	3,656	3,898	3,884	3,930
Small Group Supported Employment	3,103	3,367	3,395	3,300	3,282	3,206	3,166
Community-Based Day Support Services*	5,116	6,137	6,482	6,907	7,318	7,536	7,578

**About 45% of the people who attend Community-Based Day Support services also participate in individual or group supported employment services.*

*** These numbers reflect current enrollments – not all participants may be actively engaged in services.*

****Variation in reporting months reflect deadline changes outlined in budget cycles.*

Although the overall number of individuals in integrated employment settings continues to grow each year, challenges exist beyond those created by the pandemic that continue to be addressed by DDS and its network of providers, including:

- Difficulty obtaining job opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities who require customized work opportunities and intensive supports
- Workforce challenges that many providers are experiencing (and exacerbated by the pandemic) which result in higher vacancies and turn-over that have an impact on access to and continuity of services,
- Transportation challenges for people seeking or working at integrated jobs in the community, especially in geographic areas where there are limited public transportation and/or para-transit options.
- Individual concerns with the impact on Social Security and other public benefits when individuals earn more income.

Since FY2015, DDS has and continues to make substantive investments to support the capacity-building and development of provider agencies who facilitate employment and day services, including:

- Technical assistance and consultation focused on quality program design and development to foster increased integrated employment outcomes,
- A diverse array of employment-related training opportunities for job developers and job coaches with subject matter experts on program design and community development, best practices, and other specialized topical areas, and
- Creating Regional Employment Collaboratives that work with agency job developers to streamline and improve access to employment opportunities with local business communities. For example, the Collaboratives have been instrumental in developing a workforce training initiative with CVS Pharmacy to offer a retail skills training program that has led to the successful job placement of individuals at local CVS stores.

Conclusion

DDS works closely with families and providers to meet day program participants' needs., and over the course of the pandemic has partnered with families to find the right mix of services for their loved ones (virtual and in-person), and with day providers to create "day alternatives," or innovative in-person services that can maintain social distancing, ensure engagement from individuals/members, and reimburse providers for these services.

The Department's focus continues to be increasing the number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be valued employees and productive and contributing members of their communities as a result of these services. We do face challenges that existed before the pandemic, such as developing integrated paid employment opportunities and inclusive community experiences for individuals with more significant challenges and support needs. Likewise, there continue to be some individuals and families who express preference for employment and day services

to occur in separate, center-based programs and have reservations around pursuing work and other types of community experiences. Building on the foundation and progress accomplished in implementing the *Blueprint for Success*, DDS remains committed to our Employment First initiative and our network of providers throughout the Commonwealth.