

**Fiscal Year 2022**

**Progress Report on DDS Employment First Initiative**

**December, 2022**

**Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services**

**Progress Report on Employment First Initiative**

**Line Item 5920-2025 of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 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 2022 and those projected for fiscal year 2023; 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 by 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.

In March 2020, site-based day programs were ordered closed as a result of the public health emergency and reopened in July 2020 under strict social distancing protocols. Over the past two years, DDS day and employment providers pivoted to provide new and innovative service delivery models to meet the needs of many individuals. Day and Employment services were able to be provided through virtual service delivery and in person, or hybrid combination of these services that follow COVID-19 protocols again beginning in July 2020.  The flexibility of the virtual service model has kept many individuals engaged as site-based programming continues to be limited as a result of the pandemic or provider staffing shortages. A major focus in 2021 was facilitating a return to in-person services for individuals who are ready and interested. Many individuals who were employed prior to the pandemic and were furloughed similar to other people in the general workforce have successfully returned to work. Today, DDS continues to promote person-centered and individual choice in selecting in-person, hybrid, or virtual service delivery for employment and day supports.

The Department has also pivoted to ensure financial stability for Day program providers, including payment parity with in-person and virtual services, rounds of rate enhancements to assist in the adoption of remote/virtual service modalities during program closures and additional emergency rate enhancements in FY21 at 40% and 25% to better support our service partners. For the past two years, DDS and MassHealth have stabilized Day Program providers through rounds of financial assistance and rate enhancements to respond to the lowered on-site program utilization. These actions have been successful in stabilizing DDS Day Program providers despite the significant reductions in service provision.

To continue the long-term provision of these essential supports, on January 1, 2022, DDS updated its rates for Community Based Day Supports and Supported Employment Services that reflect updated and permanent program assumptions that will enhance service delivery approaches to support individuals through continued pandemic impacts, increase our service flexibilities, and promote increased employment opportunities and more meaningful community integration. These rate model changes, the first comprehensive rate review in a decade, reflect an average increase of 25% and incorporate programmatic design changes to include increased funding for Direct Support Staff and transportation, the addition of a “Community Connector” position, resources for technology, and additional funding to defray costs of community activities. Since there is a great demand for workers by businesses in all sectors this is a great time to leverage these opportunities and facilitate access to employment for more individuals supported by DDS.

Additional Highlights of FY22:

1. 3,970 individuals participated in Individual Integrated Employment and over 7,590 in Community-Based Day Supports (CBDS). Although enrollment numbers have fluctuated slightly over the past year, largely due to the pandemic and limited provider capacity due to staffing shortages, it is expected that a similar number of adults will transition to these services in FY2023.
2. The following chart highlights the number of Individuals enrolled in Employment and Day Services from 2015 to present:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Service Type  | 2016 | 2017 | 2018  | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
| Individual Supported Employment | 3,146 | 3,388 | 3,656 | 3,898 | 3,884 | 3,930 | 3,970 |
| Small Group Supported Employment | 3,367 | 3,395 | 3,300 | 3,282 | 3,206 | 3,166 | 3,046 |
| Community-Based Day Support Services\* | 6,137 | 6,482 | 6,907 | 7,318 | 7,536 | 7,578 | 7,590 |

*\*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.*

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:

* Workforce challenges that 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,
* Limited access to transportation services to attend community-based day programs, as well as 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 and family concerns with the impact on Social Security and other public benefits when individuals earn more income
* Developing job opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities with greater support needs who require customized work opportunities and more intensive supports

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. During 2021 DDS engaged in a collaborative planning process with providers and families and sought input through forums and/or surveys with stakeholders to better understand the impact of COVID, lessons learned to incorporate in services moving forward, and ideas about preferences and future directions in service delivery to better support and increase quality employment outcomes and meaningful community engagement in day services. Some of the ongoing initiatives include:

* Technical assistance and consultation for provider agencies focused on quality program design and development to foster increased integrated employment outcomes, and community-based day supports as a pathway to employment.
* 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,
* Increased access to technology and integration in service delivery to promote skill development and independence for individuals receiving services, as well as developing expertise among direct provider agency staff, including linkages to the Department’s Technology Forward Initiative, and
* Supporting 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**

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. We continue to 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.