

Massachusetts Career Centers and Workforce Development Youth Services: Meeting the Needs of Young People with Disabilities

By David Hoff, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston

Young people with disabilities are no different from other youth: they need help deciding what career areas to explore, accessing further education and training, and gaining work experience. Career Centers and youth services available from the workforce development system are resources that can be utilized by young people transitioning from school to adult life, and preparing to enter the world of work. Over the last several years, Career Centers and other workforce development programs throughout Massachusetts have worked successfully on the transition process with local schools, students with disabilities, and the disability community.

This publication contains a variety of strategies and guidelines for accessing the services of the workforce development system that can be used by Career Centers, and by young people with disabilities, schools, and parents.

- Assume that young people with disabilities can participate fully. Start with the assumption that young people with disabilities can benefit fully from the youth-oriented services of Career Centers and the workforce development system. This means recognizing that young people with disabilities have the same right as other young people to participate in such programs. Career Centers and other workforce development programs can send a clear message via outreach efforts that young people with disabilities are welcome.
- Build awareness of Career Center services. All students, including those with disabilities, benefit from becoming aware of the resources of Career Centers through tours and information sessions. These students can begin to utilize Career Centers for their immediate needs, and also see Career Centers as a long-term resource. Including parents in this process helps ensure family support, so orientations and tours should be held at times that are convenient for both parents and students.
- Include students with disabilities in Youth Career Centers. Young people sometimes feel uncomfortable using Career Centers, since they are often geared toward a wide range of age groups. Some Career Centers, such as the North Shore Career Center and FutureWorks in Springfield, have developed locations and services specifically geared towards young people, with staff specializing in meeting the needs of teens and young adults. Along with employment assistance, at these

Youth Career Centers young people receive referrals and access to training, apprenticeship programs, remedial education, summer employment programs, and post-secondary education. These Youth Career Centers are an excellent resource for young people with disabilities, particularly in conjunction with supports from school personnel and disability-service providers.

- Include young people with disabilities in the full range of workforce development youth services. Each of the 16 workforce investment areas in Massachusetts receives funding for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth Services (including summer employment) and Connecting Activities.
 - WIA Youth Services consist of after-school services and summer employment programs, as well as training and youth development programs for young people who have left school. Young people with disabilities are highly eligible for WIA youth services. Some WIA youth funding is used for summer employment, and the state often provides additional funding for summer jobs.
 - Connecting Activities are school-to-career activities that operate in schools throughout the state. They are intended to connect students and businesses, and to provide structured work experiences for students that support both academic and career-building skills.

In some regions, such as the North Shore, WIA Youth Services, Connecting Activities, and summer jobs programs can be accessed via Career Centers. In other regions, these services are accessed via the Workforce

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Investment Board. In either case, young people with disabilities can take advantage of these services, possibly with the assistance of school personnel or disability-service providers.

- Participate in Job Shadow Day. Job Shadow Day (www.jobshadow.org) occurs every February, and is typically linked with Connecting Activities. Young people with disabilities can be included in these and similar youth-mentoring events, and as with other activities, should be provided the necessary supports and assistance to participate fully.
- Use school and provider personnel for support. School personnel and service providers can support individual students to use the various core services available from Career Centers, such as resume development, interviewing, and job-search basics. In Massachusetts, many Career Centers have worked directly with school staff and disability-service providers to facilitate such efforts.
- Offer accommodations and assistance. Career Centers and youth service providers can proactively offer accommodations to young people by making all young people aware of the availability of accommodations, and emphasizing that young people with disabilities have a legal right to accommodations. Schools and the disability-service system can offer technical support regarding the specifics of accommodations. As an example, many young people with disabilities require additional time for assessments as an accommodation. Schools in particular are key, in order to understand the accommodations the young person has used in school and how these translate to other settings.
- Participate on transition teams. Part of the process for young people with disabilities transitioning from school to adult life includes development of a transition team to assist and guide this process, as specified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Career Center and youth-program staff can participate on these teams, integrating and coordinating services as needed. One example is at the Franklin/Hampshire Career Center, where a School to Work Coordinator has provided activities and services based on Individual

Education Plans (IEPs). At the request of special education departments, students at this Career Center are connected to WIA youth programs, apprenticeships with local businesses, and work-based learning plans.

- Offer Career Center presentations at transition events. School districts regularly hold transition outreach events, including transition fairs, for parents and students. These events are a place for youth ages 14–22 and their families to discuss options after high school with a variety of service providers, including Career Centers. Similarly, Career Centers have made presentations at a variety of transition-related conferences around the state. Participation by Career Center and workforce-development youth-services staff has helped to increase awareness of how their services can help students achieve their goals after they leave school. At such events, students and parents are encouraged to attend a Career Center orientation to become aware of all services available.
- Conduct workshops for students at Career Centers. In Metro North, The Career Place created “Tune Up”, a series of workshops tailored for students who might need individualized information and assistance. This was done in cooperation with the special education departments in local school districts, with 7 to 15 students participating in each series of workshops. Three or four co-facilitators assisted the students in building skills to prepare them for the job search and employment. One of the major positive effects of this effort has been having the students leave the school environment where they are comfortable and use community resources. Such experiences are important as students prepare for adult life.

Like all young people, youth with disabilities need to begin the process of career development during their teenage years. Career Centers and workforce development youth services can play important roles in these efforts, and in most cases, simply by creating a welcoming environment that is open, flexible, and accommodating, the workforce development system can help these young people to move ahead on the road to career success.

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Center for Health Policy and Research
333 South Street
Shrewsbury, MA 01545

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