

MN Partners for Youth: “Lessons Learned”

Minnesota’s 2012-2015 Disability Employment Initiative for Youth

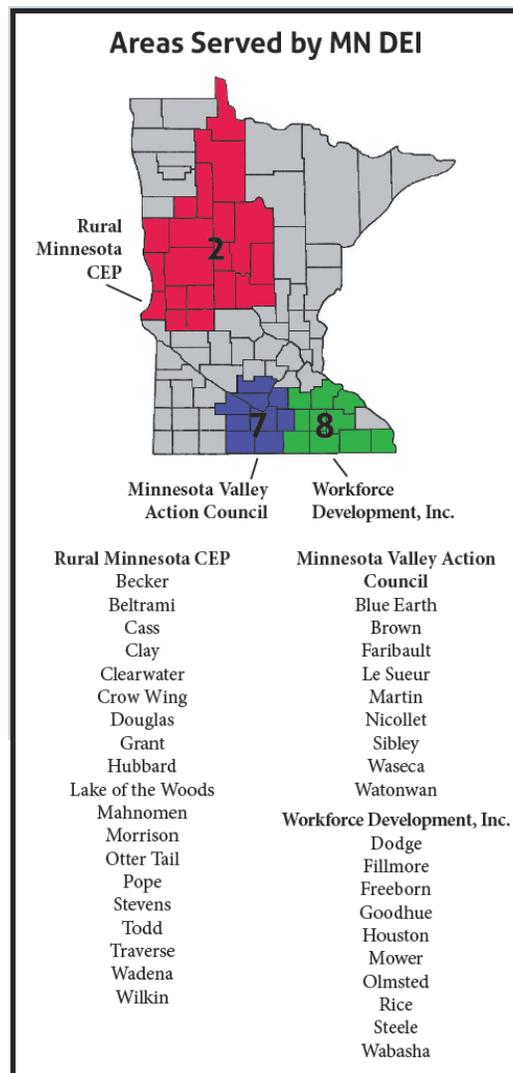
The purpose of this paper is to highlight the effective combination of practices utilized by Partners for Youth, Minnesota’s Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) project. It reflects the opinions of Disability Resource Coordinators, program administrators of youth programs authorized by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA)/Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Vocational Rehabilitation Services counselors, state steering committee members, and staff from PACER Center.

Partners for Youth, Minnesota’s Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) project, an innovative partnership among key Minnesota youth-serving stakeholders, focused on enhancing the outcomes of at-risk youth with disabilities, ages 14-24, served through Minnesota’s youth workforce system. The primary purpose of the grant was to help youth with disabilities and additional barriers successfully transition to employment and/or post-secondary education through the use of specific strategies described below.

Partners for Youth was funded in 2012 by the U.S. Department of Labor in the third round of state DEI grant competitions. Project activities were implemented in three primarily rural Workforce Service Areas (WSAs):

- **Rural MN Concentrated Employment Program (RMCEP)**, based in Detroit Lakes (population 8,569), serves 19 counties in West-central and North Central MN.
- **South Central Workforce Council/Minnesota Valley Action Council (MVAC)**, based in Mankato (population 39,994), serves 9 counties in South Central MN.
- **Workforce Development Inc. (WDI)**, based in Rochester (population 211,853) serves 10 counties in Southeast Minnesota. Although based in Minnesota’s third largest city, the rest of the service area is primarily rural.

The grant was administered by the Minnesota Department Employment and Economic Development (DEED)’s Office of Youth Development. Project activities were overseen by a steering committee composed of members of Minnesota’s Shared Vision for Youth State Team, an interagency team comprised of 28 state agencies and other key partners focused on at-risk youth. Core members of the steering committee included the Minnesota Department of Education, DEED’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind, Social Security, and PACER Center, the state’s federally-funded parent training and information center.



MN DEI Partners for Youth Strategies

Local **Disability Resource Coordinators (DRCs)** were a key strategy of the project. Three DRCs coordinated local implementation of required activities in each implementation site, provided expertise and guidance to local staff working with youth with disabilities age 14-24, and initiated outreach to community stakeholders. The DRCs were proactive in their efforts to build partnerships and leverage the resources of partner agencies to help youth with disabilities.

In addition to the DRCs, other project strategies featured in this paper include:

1. **Expanding existing partnerships with state and local agencies and community stakeholders**
2. Utilizing the **National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth's *Guideposts for Success*** as a framework for youth assessment and coordinated service delivery
3. Formulating and implementing person-centered **Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs)**
4. **Support from a state-based disability-focused intermediary organization (PACER Center)** for:
 - o material development,
 - o staff development,
 - o parent training,
 - o community stakeholder activities.

Strong consensus emerged regarding the project's most effective strategies in post-project interviews with staff engaged in implementation of local project activities, state steering committee members, and additional state and local level project partners.

From Networking to Collaboration

The consensus among Minnesota DEI Partners for Youth state and local stakeholders was that the project's most important strategy *and* outcome was *stronger working relationships between local level partners*. The DRCs and youth staff interviewed felt that they and their local partners developed a deeper understanding of one another's capacity which led to more effective, coordinated, and cost-effective services for individual youth.



All stakeholders interviewed stressed the strong working relationships between local Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) counselors, Centers for Independent Living, and WIA/WIOA staff that were forged through this project. Additional community stakeholders including Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs), Special Education Case Managers, county social workers, mental health professionals, and Disability Service staff from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MNSCU) also participated in a range of project activities. These activities included brainstorming meetings; planning community outreach events such as parent trainings on Work Incentives, the *Guideposts for Success* and other transition topics; networking events; focus groups; and transition fairs. Representatives of youth serving agencies also served on the Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs) of individual youth as appropriate.

The proactive efforts of each area’s Disability Resource Coordinators were key to the development of these working relationships.

Continuum of Collaboration

	Networking	Cooperation	Collaboration
Purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interact with outside agencies to develop contacts within each agency • Increase understanding of agency mission and services among professional colleagues and community stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer clients to contacts at appropriate outside agencies for services not provided by one’s agency • Share information about program services upon request 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine funding from one or more local agencies to meet the needs of clients that go beyond the capacity of a single agency
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information exchange • Community outreach • Primarily peer to peer communication, however, new connections with state, regional, local management, or program level staff are strengthened or initiated • Planned or unplanned, formal or informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverages outside resources and conserves resources of one’s own agency • Limits duplication of services • Encouraged by state or local administrative staff or initiated by program staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiyear commitment • Coordinate cross-agency resources to address needs of an individual • Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems • Roles, responsibilities and timelines are agreed upon • Formal written agreements at the state and/or community level

Stakeholder Comments on Expanded Local Partnerships

"The DEI Project allowed us to partner with VRS on a whole other level. After the grant was awarded but before we received DEI funds, we held a meeting of all area vocational rehabilitation as well as independent living center staff and the youth program staff of our centers to introduce them to each other and to brainstorm how to work with each other. Prior to this meeting we did not have a history of working closely together. A lot of times we were not familiar with each other and how each other worked. VRS didn't know what WIA youth programs provided and vice versa. Right off the bat, this meeting was a game changer. It was the beginning of new relationships between organizations. This meeting opened the doors to future collaboration and led to referrals to one another's programs and the blending and braiding of resources to best meet the needs of each individual."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, Workforce Development Inc. (WDI)

*"The DEI Project absolutely took relationships with our local partners to a new level. It has helped us **do more with less**. We now have monthly meetings with VRS staff to review our shared caseload, avoid duplication of effort, and share information that can help youth be successful in their work experience."*

WIA/WIOA Youth Program Administrators (Heather Gleason, Nancy Haag, Michelle Forliti),
South Central Workforce Council/Minnesota Valley Action Council (MVAC)

"Many of the CTICs hadn't even known the WIA Youth programs existed before this project. Engaging in DEI Project activities along with VRS and WIA leadership helped some CTICs develop new leadership and solidify the purpose of CTICs that had been struggling. Concrete things also resulted from activities

inspired by the project. One CTIC sets aside time at every other meeting to consider an individual student's situation using the Guideposts framework to identify needs and discuss potential solutions then follow-up by linking youth to services."

Jayne Spain, Minnesota Department of Education

"Our project connected with other community organizations/agencies to create Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs). We worked with VRS in a different way and strengthened our relationship. We also worked with mental health professionals not normally involved in getting youth employed, worked with school Individual Education Program (IEP) case managers, got county social workers in to talk about employment, brought in mentors from [the Independent Living Center], brought in employers at some point, which had not been done before – and parents."

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, Rural MN Concentrated Employment Program (RMCEP)

"This project really increased partnerships serving youth with disabilities at the local level. Many youth were dually enrolled in VRS and WIA. The Southeast [WSA] VRS and WIA partners gave the message to schools that they are the same system and there is no wrong door. Planning with the CTICs made it a broad community effort. A lot of regional planning took place through CTICs in terms of getting the word out about programs and parent and community trainings."

Alyssa Klein, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED)

The Guideposts for Success

The project's success in expanding partnerships with state and community agencies is a result of a synergy created by multiple project strategies. For example, Youth Profile and Youth Action Plan forms developed for the project by PACER Center incorporated the framework of the **Guideposts for Success** into the assessment and planning process of each individual youth served. The *Guideposts for Success* are a research-based framework that outlines what all youth, including youth with disabilities, need to successfully move from school to employment, postsecondary education, and living independently in their communities. The needs of youth in all five *Guidepost* areas¹ are considered in the Youth Profile and then addressed in the Youth Action Plan. Needs identified vary as they depend on the situation of each individual and do not necessarily result in services in all *Guidepost* categories.

Youth case managers in all three participating Workforce Service Areas found this a helpful process and plan to continue to utilize the *Guideposts* framework in youth assessments going forward. One agency even incorporated the Youth Profile format into the common assessment form they use for all their clients, youth and adults, with and without disabilities.

¹ School-Based Preparatory Experiences, Career Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences, Youth Development and Leadership, Family Involvement and Supports, and Connecting Activities (helping young people access programs and services beyond education and career development services, e.g. Social Security, transportation, health, independent living, and recreation).

Stakeholder Comments on the Guideposts for Success

"The DEI Action Plan and Youth Profile combined with our existing assessment activities helped staff understand a youth's initial needs and to identify goals. In addition to helping counselors assess youth needs, the Guideposts for Success framework helped engage youth in goal setting. Moving forward we will continue to make the forms available for the youth staff. We are also introducing our new youth counselors to the Guideposts for Success framework during their orientation."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, WDI

"Youth program staff had attended IEP meetings previously, but only went with information. Now we go with a plan for what happens after graduation that is supported by the IEP. Percentage of persons with disabilities achieving success went up significantly – because of the holistic view of what a person needs."

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, RMCEP

"The Guideposts for Success provides a common language when speaking with employers and schools about the desired outcomes for youth as they transition to adulthood."

Kay Tracy, Director, DEED Office of Youth Development

Integrated Resource Teams

Integrated Resource Teams (IRT) were often convened to help address youth needs in *Guidepost* areas beyond the capacity of what the WIA Youth Programs could provide alone. Youth were key members of their team and final decision makers. Meetings were hosted by a case manager representing the DEI project. Other team members typically included the DRC, family members, and youth professionals from partner agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), county social services, and special education case managers. Strategies that aligned with a youth's strengths, interests and needs of the youth were explored using information from the Youth Profile. Then specific activities were agreed upon, a responsible person was assigned for each action item, and this information was incorporated into an Action Plan or Individual Service Plan (ISP).

Again, stakeholder interviews uniformly indicated that the IRT process proved an effective means of leveraging resources from various public and private organizations on behalf of an individual youth. IRT meetings were a catalyst for partner agencies to provide funding for specific elements of a youth's action plan. Committing to cross agency funding seems easier to obtain when discussions focus on meeting the specific needs of specific youth rather than more hypothetical conversations. Partners see other agencies making commitments aligned with their priorities and observe that their funds can be more effective when coordinated with other partner resources in a more holistic approach to helping youth.

The experience of conducting multiple IRT meetings promoted a deeper understanding among partner agencies of what each could and could not do, taking memorandums of understanding from abstraction to

implementation. It fostered ongoing working relationships that resulted in expanded partnership and collaboration at the local level that can be built upon in the future.

The consistently positive outcomes for youth that resulted from the Guidepost-based assessment process and IRT meetings made a strong impression on staff from both the WIA/WIOA youth programs and partner agencies. This success eventually eradicated initial concerns expressed in varying degrees by staff in all 3 WSA implementation regions that the IRT process would be difficult and time consuming as well as any insecurity that they did not have the capacity to meet the needs of youth with disabilities.

Stakeholder Comments about Integrated Resource Teams

"RMCEP will continue to utilize the Integrated Resource Team process after the grant ends. Staff initially feared they did not have the capacity to serve youth with disabilities, that they would not be able to reach successful outcomes. They were also resistant to [IRTs]. 'Not enough time, can't get professionals together, etc.' Now they feel the IRT process is valuable. For one thing it has helped them understand what their partners do. And the outcomes have demonstrated its value: 70% of youth were hired in the community, finished a post-secondary credential, or both. The only problems occurred when we didn't use IRTs as we should have – there was redundancy if we didn't coordinate properly, or we didn't make specific assignments as to who will be doing what."

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, RMCEP

*"The IRT process has many benefits. Everyone is **at the table at the same time** and each brings specific resources. It is certainly more helpful to youth as well – to not have to contact multiple agencies. Also youth feel supported when they see all the adults who have high expectations and are invested in their success.*

The process allowed us to access more resources and led to better outcomes for youth. Staff now feel comfortable arranging IRTs on their own, even without a DRC. We plan to continue when appropriate."

WIA/WIOA Youth Program Administrators, South Central Workforce Council/MVAC

"The majority of youth we served have IRTs: 113 out of 138 youth enrolled. Our counselors will continue to use IRTs and be proactive about serving youth with disabilities in our WIOA youth programs."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, WDI

"The IRT reflected the fact that the youth had multifaceted needs. By bringing together multiple resources in an IRT setting, our youth practitioners were better able to work with youth with various needs."

Larry Eisenstadt, State DEI Co-Lead, DEED Office of Youth Development

Capacity Building Activities

PACER staff provided both on-site and online webinar training on a variety of topics over the course of the project. Topics included assistive technology, youth with mental health needs, the needs of postsecondary

students and younger youth with disabilities from diverse cultures, and career-planning activities now required for every student in Minnesota. PACER staff also responded to requests from local CTICs and schools affiliated with DEI implementation sites for trainings on the *Guideposts for Success* and other transition topics. These staff development and capacity building activities contributed to the increased confidence WIA/WIOA youth program staff developed concerning working with youth with disabilities. These activities have increased the potential for DEI pilot sites to continue to serve youth with disabilities after project funding ends.

Stakeholder Comments about Increased Staff Capacity

"Biggest game-changers to come out of the project are gaining new understanding of youth with disabilities and how to assist them through programs that are available. We now have greater expertise and also know [whom] to contact if we need more information. We have higher expectations for this group of young people and more confidence they can be successful through the programs we offer."

WIA/WIOA Youth Program Administrators, South Central Workforce Council/MVAC

"The PACER trainings on working with youth with mental health needs were fantastic and well received by both VRS and WIA staff. All the tools and resources we received to work with different types of disability were helpful and built our confidence."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, WDI

*"Assistive Technology, the Guideposts for Success – we wouldn't have gotten buy-in from staff if we didn't have PACER trainers here. 60% of our clients had Learning Disabilities. **Learning about the technology that met their needs was the most effective TA we received.** Smart pens, fonts for dyslexia, iPad applications. We hope to have one demo model of certain AT available in each of our workforce centers, as well as one staff person trained to provide a demo. PACER parent training workshops were well attended and well received. **We are also doing more things with the Somali population than previously.** Through [PACER staff] we established relationships with leaders in the Somali community and developed initiatives to help individuals find employment outside of Pelican Rapids. As a result of DEI, we are doing a better job in reaching out to Native American youth with disabilities."*

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, RMCEP

Family Engagement

MN DEI Partners for Youth strategies included on-site parent training throughout the state on work incentives, benefits planning, the *Guideposts for Success* and other transition topics. Family Engagement was also discussed as one of the five categories of supports needed by youth identified in the *Guideposts*. One DRC felt that the parent participation in the IRT was a critical factor in their success.

Stakeholder Comments about Family Engagement

"Family support was critical. When parents bought into the action plan, and its milestones for short and long term goals, it had a stronger impact on youth. We were speaking with one voice. Giving parents a copy of a youth's Visual Roadmap [Action Plan] – with milestones on the road – helped synchronize our efforts. Parents could help judge their youth's progress and whether additional meetings were needed."

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, RMCEP

"PACER presentations in schools helped bring families more on board and brought parents into transition planning before a student's senior year. Our activities with area CTICs also helped build family support. Families attended IRT meetings. This raised awareness of our youth programs and generated more referrals to DEI project from schools."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, WDI

"The type of family engagement most helpful to our youth was to help parents allow their youth to grow to find their own voice but still have their parents' support. Helping youth advocate for themselves helped build their confidence. When parents saw their [son or daughter] be successful they were able to give them more room to grow."

WIA/WIOA Youth Program Administrators, South Central Workforce Council/MVAC

"Our partners at the Social Security Administration and PACER Center helped families understand the variety of supports and incentives available to assist their sons and daughters as they moved from high school to post-secondary education and employment. Activities encouraging family support and involvement were a unique and important component of Partners for Youth which contributed to the project's success."

Lynn Douma, DEI State Co-Lead, DEED Office of Youth Development

Sustainability

Key staff from MN's DEI Partners for Youth Project express confidence that they can sustain the project in part.

Project stakeholders felt the strong working relationships that were established between MN's WIOA youth programs and their community partners were key, sustaining the use of successful project strategies. Increased confidence about serving and higher expectations for youth with disabilities, continued use of the IRT process, the *Guideposts for Success*, and project tools such as the Youth Profile, Action Plan and a parent training curriculum on Work Incentives and Social Security Benefits will help other WIOA youth programs in Minnesota and elsewhere implement successful MN DEI Partners for Youth strategies.

While two of MN DEI'S implementation sites primarily worked with youth too young to enroll in the Ticket to Work (TTW) program, the TTW and benefits planning expertise developed in one region as well as by one former DRC has opened the door for continued work in these areas. Based on their experience with DEI, RMCEP has created the HireAble initiative to help customers with disabilities, especially those receiving Social Security or

Supplemental Security Income benefits, transition back into the workforce without fear of losing disability benefits. Information about the initiative is available on the [HireAble website](#).

Stakeholder Comments about Sustainability

"The strength of the relationships built through this project is the foundation of our sustainability plan."

Natalie Amy, Disability Resource Coordinator, WDI

"All the work Minnesota is doing around Olmstead will utilize relationships established through the DEI Project in these communities. This will help the State achieve the measurable employment outcomes of MN's Olmstead plan."

Jayne Spain, Minnesota Department of Education

"The strong relationships formed through the DEI Project will continue to have ongoing impact. Disability Resource Coordinators of two of the project's implementation sites have already been hired to be financial specialists doing financial planning including benefits planning for a new state project funded by Social Security."

Alyssa Klein, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, DEED

"We plan to offer a more consistent work-training program that occurs over the course of a year instead of a few months. Project activities led to significant improvements for youth participants being able to work for an employer instead of a subsidized youth program. We plan to continue this as well. In addition, we will continue to provide benefits counseling for ticket holders with VRS clients. Four of our 8 centers have certified Work Incentive practitioners and we have plans for one person from our four other centers to earn a credential from Cornell's SSA accredited Benefits Planning program. Likewise we will continue to identify TTW eligible individuals and help them find meaningful employment."

Greg Kaiser, Disability Resource Coordinator, RMCEP

"Because of what we learned and because we have more partners we will continue to be able to help youth with disabilities be successful in our youth programs."

WIA/WIOA Youth Program Administrators, South Central Workforce Council/MVAC

"One of our priorities as we implement the WIOA Young Adult Program is to work closely with VRS to support their goals to expand pre-employment transition services for in-school youth/students with disabilities by partnering to create innovative work experiences."

Kay Tracy, Director, DEED Office of Youth Development

This workforce solution was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. The solution was created by the grantee and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Labor. The Department of Labor makes no guarantees, warranties, or assurances of any kind, express or implied, with respect to such information, including any information on linked sites and including, but not limited to, accuracy of the information or its completeness, timeliness, usefulness, adequacy, continued availability or ownership. This solution is copyrighted by the institution that created it. Internal use, by an organization and/or personal use by and individual for non-commercial purposes is permissible. All other uses require the prior authorization of the copyright owner.