

NEON

NATIONAL EXPANSION
OF EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITIES
NETWORK

PLAN TO INCREASE COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

OFFICE OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT POLICY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

January, 2022

RICHARD LUECKING, ED.D.

DAVID MANK, PH.D.

Disclaimer: This document was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) to Economic Systems Inc. (EconSys) under Contract No. GS-10F-0042M; Order No. 1605DC-19-F-00243. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

NATIONAL EXPANSION OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES NETWORK (NEON): PLAN TO INCREASE COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
BACKGROUND	1
ACTION PLANNING PROCESS.....	1
RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION ITEMS.....	2
<i>State and Federal Governments' Response.....</i>	2
<i>Virtual Supports</i>	3
<i>Personnel Development, including Direct Support Professionals.....</i>	3
<i>Technology</i>	4
<i>Local Provider Organization Engagement.....</i>	4
<i>Employer Engagement.....</i>	4
<i>Family Engagement</i>	4
<i>Continuing and Expanding Implementation of CIE.....</i>	4
<i>Transition from School-to-Work.....</i>	5
<i>Need for New Resources</i>	5
BACKGROUND	6
INTENDED ACTION PLANNING PROCESS	6
EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	7
ADJUSTED PLANNING PROCESSES DUE TO THE PANDEMIC	7
LOCAL PROVIDER ORGANIZATION PARTICIPATION IN NEON	7
NATIONAL PROVIDER ORGANIZATION PARTICIPATION IN NEON.....	8
SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT ACTIVITIES AND INPUT.....	8
FINDINGS.....	9
FUNDING/REIMBURSEMENT STRUCTURES.....	9
CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH STAFF TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	9
NEW SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS.....	10
EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT AND NEW TYPES OF JOBS POST PANDEMIC.....	10
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	11
SERVICE TRANSFORMATION WILL LOOK DIFFERENT	11
RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION STEPS	12
STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS' RESPONSE	12
VIRTUAL SUPPORTS	12
PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS.....	13
TECHNOLOGY	13
LOCAL PROVIDER ORGANIZATION ENGAGEMENT	13
EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT	13
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT.....	13
CONTINUING AND EXPANDING IMPLEMENTATION OF CIE.....	14
TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL-TO-WORK.....	14
NEED FOR NEW RESOURCES	14

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY.....	15
APPENDIX A: NATIONAL PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATING IN NEON	16
ASSOCIATION OF PEOPLE SUPPORTING EMPLOYMENT FIRST (APSE)	16
AMERICAN NETWORK OF COMMUNITY OPTIONS AND RESOURCES (ANCOR).....	16
THE ARC OF THE UNITED STATES (THE ARC)	16
ACCSES.....	17
SOURCEAMERICA	17
APPENDIX B: NEON SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS.....	18

NATIONAL EXPANSION OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES NETWORK (NEON): PLAN TO INCREASE COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 2016, the Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities (the Advisory Committee) submitted a [Final Report to Congress](#). In this Report, the Advisory Committee consisting of self-advocates, providers of employment services, representatives of national disability advocacy organizations, experts with a background in academia, employer representatives, and others with related expertise presented issues that impact the pursuit of competitive integrated employment (CIE) by individuals with disabilities and made recommendations for mitigating barriers to CIE. Among the key recommendations of the Advisory Committee was the need to incentivize employment service providers to effectively provide CIE through both organizational restructuring and staff professional development. To address this need, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) established the National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON).

Through NEON, ODEP contracted with National Provider Organizations (NPOs) to help expand CIE service delivery across their membership networks, made up of Local Provider Organizations (LPOs). ODEP selected five NPOs to participate: Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE), American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), The Arc of the United States, ACCSES, and SourceAmerica.

NEON created this National Plan based on input from and experience of NPOs and their participating LPO members. The National Plan will guide the NPOs as they work with their respective affiliate members to increase CIE. The National Plan is also intended to provide information and recommendations useful to policy makers, funding entities, and in-the-field activities in the overall national effort to increase CIE.

Action Planning Process

Each NPO recruited five affiliate LPOs who agreed to undergo a *Provider Self-Assessment* Process with the assistance of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). The Self-Assessment identified each provider's current CIE policies and created an action plan to increase CIE within these organizations with the consultative assistance of the SMEs. The experiences from this work with LPOs and regular input from NPOs would provide information for practical and policy level improvements in the pursuit of CIE for individuals with disabilities.

Complementing the work with the LPOs, the NPOs and SMEs met quarterly during Year 1. During these meetings, LPOs shared ways the NPOs could support LPOs, determined ways they could support and guide their other affiliates expand CIE, and reviewed related policy and practice issues. These activities

helped NEON develop a National Plan to increase CIE, establish NEON activities in Years 2 and 3, and reported to the field about policy and practice directions suggested by the Plan.

The COVID-19 Pandemic drastically caused LPOs to alter or suspend services. This meant that the NEON initiative necessarily recalibrated both its approach and its expectations. After February 2020, SMEs conducted their work virtually by phone or by online video conferencing platforms as in-person consultation was not safe or practical. The remaining NPO quarterly meetings were held as scheduled but were held virtually through a webinar and telephone format. In addition to the quarterly meetings, NPOs communicated and collaborated between these meetings. The following summarizes the discussions and ideas of the NPO Leads and SMEs.

Recommendations and Action Items

NEON identified the following recommendations based on the feedback from the NPO Leads, LPO Leads, and SMEs. These recommendations span the areas of:

- State and Federal Governments' Response,
- Virtual Supports,
- Personnel Development, including Direct Support Professionals (DSPs),
- Technology,
- Local Provider Organization Engagement,
- Employer Engagement,
- Family Engagement,
- Continuing and Expanding Implementation of CIE,
- School-to-Work Transition, and
- The Need for New Resources.

State and Federal Governments' Response

- **Provide greater flexibility in service definitions and funding.** This includes changing and adding service definitions to promote emerging use of virtual supports that result in employment outcomes.
- **Make permanent funding for virtual supports and a new mix of virtual and in-person supports.** During the pandemic, many states made it possible for provider agencies to be reimbursed for services and supports provided by phone or two-way video, in addition to in-person supports. This flexibility, adjustment of service definitions, and funding of a mix of virtual and in-person services should continue for the foreseeable future. In addition, emerging funding strategies for virtual supports should be documented and disseminated.
- **Create new incentives for fully integrated and personalized supports.** With many congregate settings presently closed or reduced, incentivize personalized and integrated supports. This

is especially important given Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) integration expectations, now expected in 2023¹.

- Increase funding for access to technology (smart phones, tablets, etc.) for people with disabilities and employment support personnel. During the pandemic, it became clear that many people with disabilities do not have access to effective communications and Internet technology. It has also been discovered that employment support personnel may not have up-to-date technology devices to provide virtual supports. Funding sources should seek ways to pay for such devices and technology for people with disabilities and employment support personnel. Improvements in the use of technology requires both access to available technology and support to develop fluency in usage. This is true for both people with disabilities and employment support personnel.

Virtual Supports

- Document emerging new practices of virtual supports. LPOs participating in NEON and others nationwide have innovatively provided virtual supports in addition to in-person.
- Document and disseminate new and emerging practices in job development, virtual job site supports, Discovery², etc. LPOs have also adjusted many of the service methodologies of CIE. These innovations are worthy of study, documentation, and nationwide dissemination.

Personnel Development, including Direct Support Professionals

- Create and sustain new Learning Communities and Collaboratives. In a time of crisis and rapid change, it is possible for LPOs to become isolated and lack information about effective new strategies and emerging innovations. NPOs and State and national governments should create structures of communication and sharing of emerging new ideas and knowledge. Currently, some states are working to organize virtual and online communities of practice for discussion and sharing of both new problems and new solutions.
- Continue to support and adequately fund CIE training, and require DPSs to become certified in CIE. In a time of such change, training and up-to-date information becomes even more important. States should prioritize and fund expanded training of employment support personnel.

¹ In 2014, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) finalized a rule establishing a new requirement for the settings in which Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) are delivered. See 79 Fed. Reg. 2948 (Jan. 16, 2014), available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-01-16/pdf/2014-00487.pdf>; see also 42 CFR Parts 430, 431, et. al. Under the requirements, states must develop implementation plans and determine which providers meet the new requirements. The rule requires that HCBS settings have qualities that promote community integration and other qualities based on an individual's needs as indicated in the person-centered service plan. The full implementation deadline for this rule had previously been set for 2022 and has now been extended to 2023.

² Discovery is a qualitative process aimed to better understand job seekers by understanding their strengths (potential contributions to employers), their needs (the features that need to be in place for success), and their interests (providing a direction to the type of work that the individual wants to do). More information on Discovery is available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/customized-employment>

- Conduct an initial assessment to standardize skills, training, education requirements, and core competencies necessary to establish an occupational code to professionalize the support workforce, including DSPs.

Technology

- Fund and expand access to needed technology and devices, along with support to have access to gain skills in use of such technology. As the pandemic has unfolded, as noted above, lack of access to up-to-date technology devices has been exposed for people with disabilities and for support personnel.

Local Provider Organization Engagement

- Promote the participation of LPO leadership as a prerequisite for increasing CIE services.
- Create a straightforward and uncomplicated self-assessment as a means of determining a plan for increasing CIE services by individual LPOs.
- Develop a template for specifying agreements for NPOs, LPOs, and SMEs that would indicate expectations, roles, and expected outcomes for efforts to increase CIE services.
- Outline potential benefits that would accrue to LPOs if they took on efforts to increase CIE. This will allow LPOs in all parts of the country to understand and consider engaging in the processes for increasing CIE services.

Employer Engagement

- Document emerging practices for employer relationships. LPOs have continued job development and employer engagement even during this pandemic. Virtual contacts now include communications with employers for both job development and employment supports. These emerging practices should be further developed, documented, and disseminated.

Family Engagement

- Document and disseminate effective communication strategies with families about CIE. The need for new communication strategies with families and home support personnel have become apparent during the pandemic. This includes the need for new discussion about individualized and community focused employment opportunities and community-based wraparound services.
- Communicate about how congregation of people with disabilities is an integration issue (i.e., HCBS 2023), but now also a health and safety issue. Safety has become a more important topic in communication with people with disabilities and families in discussing congregate settings and CIE settings.

Continuing and Expanding Implementation of CIE

- Sustain technical assistance and support to LPOs in expanding CIE. This becomes even more important at a time when congregating people could create new and serious health and safety concerns.

Transition from School-to-Work

- **Expand access to school age integrated experiences in CIE and Pre-Employment Transition Services** (Pre-ETS), including access to and skills in technology and remote support devices (as noted above) that carries into adulthood. This also includes the need for opportunities for employment support providers to provide Pre-ETS.

Need for New Resources

- **Create and disseminate new operational resources for LPOs and their staff.** There is a need to re-think and recreate knowledge and access to best practices and tools in this new environment.

The following proposed activities are aimed at:

1. identifying best practices and resources used within our networks,
2. creating a centralized and open-source repository to house these best practices and tools,
3. disseminating access to these resources and knowledge to our networks,
4. better preparing leadership and staff of local agencies for the challenges of tomorrow, and
5. building an evidence-based case for making Medicaid/Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) funding more broadly available for remote/tech-based services.

Needed resources discussed in the NEON meetings include:

- Open-Source Resource Guide of Best Practices and New Innovations
- A White Paper on Community-Based Supports Post-COVID-19
- Collection of Case Studies of Innovative Agency Responses to COVID-19
- Collection of Organizational, Financial and Human Resource Practices to Support Innovation in Provider Organizations
- Research and Documentation of State Agency Innovations and Creative Funding
- Document New, Emerging, and Innovative Staff Training and Professional Development, including an inventory of trainings, webinars, and other resources used during NEON's Year 1 period.

BACKGROUND

In 2016 the Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities (the Advisory Committee) submitted a [Final Report to Congress](#). In this Report, the Advisory Committee consisting of self-advocates, providers of employment services, representatives of national disability advocacy organizations, experts with a background in academia, employer representatives, and others with related expertise presented issues that impact the pursuit of competitive integrated employment (CIE) by individuals with disabilities and made recommendations for mitigating barriers to CIE. Among the key recommendations of the Advisory Committee was the need to bring to scale the capacity of employment service providers to effectively provide CIE through both organizational restructuring and staff professional development. To address this need, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) established the National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON).

Through NEON, ODEP contracted with National Provider Organizations (NPOs) to help expand CIE service delivery across their membership networks, made up of Local Provider Organizations (LPOs). Five NPOs were selected and agreed to participate: Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE), American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), The Arc of the United States, ACCSES, and SourceAmerica. A brief description of the membership, nature, and mission of each of these organizations is included in Appendix A.

The first year of this three-year project called for the creation of a National Plan based on input from and experience of NPOs and their participating LPO members in the NEON process. Subsequent years of the initiative are intended to use the Plan to further guide the NPOs as they work with their respective affiliate members to increase CIE. The National Plan is also intended to provide information and recommendations useful to policy makers, funding entities, and in-the-field activities in the overall national effort to increase CIE. This report covers the process for creating the National Plan and the resulting recommended action steps for the National Plan.

Intended Action Planning Process

Each NPO recruited five affiliate LPOs who agreed to undergo a *Provider Self-Assessment* Process with the assistance of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). The purpose of the Self-Assessment was to identify status within these organizations regarding the provision of CIE and then use the Self-Assessment to create and follow an action plan to increase CIE service provision within these organizations with the consultative assistance of the SMEs. The prescribed process involved the completion of the Self-Assessment in the first three months of NEON, followed by the development of a resultant action plan. The remaining months of Year 1 would then be committed to the implementation of the action plan so that these organizations could increase their capacity to deliver services that resulted in CIE. The intention was that the experiences from this work with LPOs and regular input from NPOs would provide information for practical and policy level improvements in the pursuit of CIE for individuals with disabilities.

Complementing and concurrent to the work with the LPOs, ODEP's intent was for the NPOs and SMEs to meet quarterly during Year 1. The purpose of these meetings was to review and discuss the experience with the LPOs, share ways in which the NPOs could support LPOs participating in NEON, determine ways in which they could support and guide their other affiliates in the expansion of CIE services, and review

related policy and practice issues. These activities were designed to help ODEP develop a National Plan to Increase CIE to guide NEON activities in Years 2 and 3 of the initiative, and to report to the field about policy and practice directions suggested by the Plan.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first in-person quarterly meeting of the NPO representatives, SMEs, and ODEP staff was held on February 25, 2020. Shortly thereafter, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread. It became immediately apparent that a shift in the NEON approach would be necessary due to the drastic effect of the pandemic on local service provision. Significantly, the pandemic resulted in almost all LPOs suspending and/or re-adjusting service provision to prevent the spread of the virus among their consumers and staff. Indeed, the financial standing and future organizational viability of many LPOs became a priority to many of them. Thus, it was necessary to implement a restructured approach to the LPO Self-Assessments since SMEs could not consult with the LPOs in person, and since many of the LPOs had to address more urgent priorities regarding how to provide viable services and how the changed services would affect fiscal reimbursement.

Similarly, each NPO necessarily had to devote considerable attention to providing support and guidance to their affiliate organizations as they became immersed in addressing the effects of the pandemic on direct service provision in the field. It became clear the COVID-19 pandemic would necessitate a re-thinking about how employment service provision will be affected in the near and more distant future. Consequently, the focus of NEON shifted as described in the next section.

Adjusted Planning Processes due to the Pandemic

The most immediate and substantial consequence of the pandemic was that all operations by LPOs were drastically altered and/or suspended. This meant that the NEON initiative necessarily recalibrated both its approach and its expectations. All SME assistance after February 2020 was conducted virtually by phone and/or by online video conferencing platforms as in person consultation was not safe or practical. The remaining NPO quarterly meetings were held as scheduled but were held virtually through a webinar and telephone format. In addition to the quarterly meetings, NPOs communicated and collaborated between these meetings. The following summarizes the respective direct effects of the pandemic on LPO and NPO participation in NEON.

Local Provider Organization Participation in NEON

Initially, 24 LPOs were recruited to participate with NPOs in this work. Only 20 LPOs, however, were able to continue participation. Among the 20 participating LPOs, there was a range of availability for and participation in NEON due to the pandemic. Some of the participating LPOs were forced to suspend services altogether. Others suspended facility-based services, but continued to provide support mostly virtually/remote to consumers who were in CIE jobs considered essential.

In addition, the status of direct support staff varied across the LPOs, as many direct support staff were furloughed or laid off. Moreover, many direct support staff opted to leave for other jobs. In some organizations employment support staff were re-assigned to work in residential settings. In some LPOs this was viewed as an opportunity to improve communications and develop a better understanding of each other's services. All of these circumstances impacted the focus of the participating LPOs on the NEON process as well as the delivery of SME consultation to them. The following summarizes the effects on NEON and its planning process on LPOs:

- Six LPOs completed self-assessments with an eye toward re-opening services after the pandemic with expanded CIE service delivery.
- Six LPOs opted to undergo an alternative “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats” (SWOT) analysis as an abbreviated process to prepare for re-opening service that would include more CIE service delivery.
- Three LPOs opted for professional development on adjusted service options that would include a mix of CIE and non-work, non-facility based activity during the service day.
- Five LPOs put their participation on hold due to challenges to managing organizational processes and services caused by the pandemic.

Those LPOs that remained involved in the adjusted NEON process remained committed to some type of planning process as a way of bolstering CIE during their current and post-pandemic operation of services.

National Provider Organization Participation in NEON

Although the pandemic necessitated that the NPOs focus on supporting their respective memberships as they dealt with the COVID-19 crisis and its effect on daily service delivery to individuals with disabilities, all of the NPOs committed to continued active participation in NEON. The following summarizes the consequent approach to NPO participation in NEON.

After the February 24, 2020, quarterly NPO meeting, all three subsequent meetings were held virtually via webinar on May 5, 2020, June 19, 2020, September 22, 2020. The May 5, 2020, meeting included selected LPOs who provided input and perspective about providing CIE post COVID-19. Each quarterly meeting also included updates from the SMEs on their contacts, activity, and circumstances of working with LPOs.

Whether conducted in person or virtually, the first three quarterly meeting included facilitated discussions with the NPOs on:

- What do you see as the barriers your affiliates/members face as they work to increase CIE?
- What will it take for your affiliates/members to address these barriers?
- What will it take for you to help your affiliates/members address these barriers?
- What will you need to know from your affiliates/members to support their efforts to increase CIE?
- What are your recommendations for policy and practice?

The above questions were framed in the context of the impact of the pandemic during the May and June 2020 meetings. The September 2020 meeting also included discussions regarding the recommendations in this report as well as considerations for implementing NEON activities in Year 2.

Subject Matter Expert Activities and Input

As noted, the SMEs had to adjust their consultative assistance with the LPOs so that the contacts were virtual, and the format of the transformation planning was adjusted according to LPO circumstances. However, the SMEs remained involved in the virtual quarterly meetings with the NPOs, providing updates and perspectives on their work with LPOs. They also had additional opportunities to participate in facilitated discussions about their work and experience with LPOs. Based on their experiences, they also provided input on barriers to CIE, the effects of the pandemic on CIE services, and resultant recommendations for promoting CIE in the altered service environment.

FINDINGS

Although the effects of the pandemic significantly altered the service delivery landscape during Year 1 of NEON, the overall themes related to barriers and how to address them, and the types of supports needed for in-the-field pursuit and expansion of effective CIE remained notably consistent. While the themes remained constant, the pandemic primarily, and in many cases significantly changed the specifics of the path forward for expanded CIE. Each subsection below presents the predominant themes from NPO, LPO, and SME input and how they evolved as a result of pandemic effects.

Funding/reimbursement structures

In the inaugural NEON meeting of the NPOs much of the discussion focused on the need for funding rates from the Medicaid Waiver and from Vocational Rehabilitation that more directly prioritized CIE. That is, current fee structures were perceived to be both insufficient for and not fully focused on CIE service delivery. Moreover, the guidance and regulations as well as fee structures were perceived to be insufficiently flexible for service innovations to be implemented. For example, in some states, the amount and type of face-to-face direct service support often was prescribed to prevent alternative effective support strategies.

Significantly, the pandemic brought these issues into even stronger focus as much of the typical face-to-face support became impractical, unsafe, or both. Participating NPOs, with input from their LPO members discussed the need for new funding paradigms, for example, payment for virtual discovery, virtual job shadowing, remote job coaching, and other ways of helping individuals with disabilities find and keep CIE. In this discussion, NPOs and SMEs emphasized the need for all funding sources to prioritize CIE over other types of community support services. Funding flexibility is needed for more virtual services for community support services as well as employment services, including discovery, work exposure, resume building, and networking. Some states quickly increased flexible funding for virtual services, but other states did not do so.

Capacity building through staff training and professional development

Insufficient and inconsistent professional development opportunities for both management and direct support staff were cited by NEON participants as longstanding barriers to scaling up CIE services. They cited the importance for management staff to learn how to restructure their organizations and their service approach to be more capable of delivering CIE services. They also cited the continual need for direct support staff to learn how to effectively implement CIE and related community support strategies.

The pandemic created an environment where these needs were magnified. This is especially the case considering how service organizations now face new realities about funding and service delivery and how staff must now be taught how to deliver services in totally new ways. Since the onset of the pandemic, some states have expanded staff training opportunities, increasing training offerings on CIE and related community support topics (e.g., WA, CO, PA) in webinars, virtual meetings, or other virtual platforms.

New service delivery mechanisms

By definition, and under ordinary circumstances, the implementation of expanded CIE service delivery requires retooling of not only how reimbursement is applied in LPOs, but also how staff are deployed and trained. The pandemic accentuated this need for retooling. While all LPOs reported CIE job loss by consumers as a result of the pandemic, some services continued as some consumers were in jobs designated as essential such as in government contracting jobs, manufacturing of medical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), grocery stores, and others. Some indicated increased interest by people with disabilities in self-employment. This necessitated the creative use of technology so that job support could be provided virtually, that is, by phone and other online communication applications. Both staff and consumers had to adapt accordingly by learning how to use this technology. This has implications across the board for both current and future service delivery, including new rate structures, how and on what staff are trained, and how individuals are supported to get and keep jobs. These circumstances were a key point of discussion by the participating NPOs, LPOs, and SMEs.

The service delivery discussions also included renewed focus on the transition from school-to-work. The pandemic creates the possibility of re-focusing school-to-work discussions about career building skills and experiences, as well as creating virtual and technology supports during school years. This pandemic also creates the need for new discussions with families about career planning.

Employer engagement and new types of jobs post pandemic

The NEON participants acknowledged that effective employer engagement has long been a cornerstone of any type of integrated employment service delivery. This factors into the points made above about both staff training (e.g., how to conduct job development) and rate reimbursement (e.g., paying for job development). New skills will be needed in such areas as disability law, inclusion, essential functions of a job, employer needs, benefits planning, and new employment trends.

The pandemic necessitated revised approaches to employer engagement in two ways. First, the nature of the contact with employers changed. Many job development activities, for example, informational interviews, had to be conducted virtually. Virtual contact with employers also was increasingly necessary for supporting people already on the job. Second, because of pandemic related contact restrictions the types of jobs and the way job related tasks are performed are undergoing changes. NEON participants stressed that this not only created the need to do employer engagement differently during the pandemic, but it also will likely permanently alter the nature of many jobs. For example, working remotely is likely to be more and more common in many types of jobs. In addition, the ways in which job tasks might be customized and the opportunities for job task customization will have implications for effective employer engagement for those individuals who might benefit from customized employment. Thus, there are direct implications about where and how CIE opportunities can be developed in the future.

Family engagement

The pandemic is also changing how we think about family engagement. As CIE has expanded in recent years, there has been some family concerns about CIE due to low expectations and fear that health and safety might be compromised outside of a stable program of facility-based services.

The pandemic created the need to review the relative safety of people in enclosed spaces. That is, until the pandemic has run its course there are new risks associated with congregate services. This may change the conversation with families about the value of CIE, inviting a deeper discussion of pros and cons, as well as risks regarding CIE and congregate settings.

Service transformation will look different

The central intent of NEON has been to help organizations expand CIE service delivery. What started as a reasoned strategy to engage both national and local level organizations through regular discussion and intensive in-the-field assistance for CIE expansion quickly gave way to the alternate approaches described above. However, while the value and need for increasing CIE services remains strong, it will look different due to the impact of the pandemic. How services are funded, how staff are trained and supported to deliver it, and how it is carried out will require fresh attention. Given this reality, the experiences and discussions inherent in the NEON initiative offer useful perspectives that suggest specific recommended action in both the near and more distant future.

One major result of the NEON process has been the stated commitment, despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic, of the five NPOs to continue involvement in the initiative and to use their collective strength to influence federal and state policy related to expanding and refining CIE policy, reimbursement structures, and service delivery. In fact, the pandemic has cast new urgency to this commitment. The recommendations presented in the next section reflect their input and insight elicited during the NEON process about pursuing this undertaking.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION STEPS

As a result of the work of the NPOs, LPOs, and SMEs, and the three meetings of these NEON participants, the following recommendations emerged. These recommendations span the areas of: State and Federal Governments' Response; Virtual Supports; Personnel Development; Technology; LPO Engagement; Employer Engagement; Family Engagement; Service Transformation; School-to-Work Transition; and the Need for New Resources.

State and Federal Governments' Response

1. Provide greater flexibility in service definitions and funding. This includes changing and adding service definitions to promote emerging use of virtual supports that result in employment outcomes.
2. Make permanent funding for virtual supports and a new mix of virtual vs. in-person supports. During the pandemic, many states made it possible for provider agencies to be reimbursed for services and supports provided by phone or two-way video, in addition to in-person supports. This flexibility, adjustment of service definitions, and funding of a mix of virtual and in-person should continue for the foreseeable future. In addition, emerging funding strategies for virtual supports should be documented and disseminated.
3. Create new incentives for fully integrated and personalized supports. With many congregate settings presently closed or reduced, incentivize personalized and integrated supports. This is especially important given HCBS integration expectations, now expected in 2023.
4. Increase funding for access to technology (smart phones, tablets, etc.) for people with disabilities and employment support personnel. During the pandemic, it became clear that many people with disabilities do not have access to effective communications and internet technology. It was also discovered that employment support personnel may not have up-to-date technology devices to provide virtual supports. Funding sources should seek ways to pay for such devices and technology for people with disabilities and employment support personnel. Improvements in the use of technology requires both access to available technology and support to develop fluency in usage. This is true for people with disabilities and employment support personnel.
5. Need for systems changes to allocate and increase funding for Direct Support Professional (DSP) wages. Provider organizations have been experiencing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining DSPs due to low reimbursement rates. Private sector jobs are raising wages significantly to attract workers during the pandemic workforce shortage and human service organizations have difficulty competing. This is having a significant impact on their ability to provide individualized, flexible services.

Virtual Supports

6. Document emerging new practices of virtual supports. LPOs participating in NEON and others nationwide have innovated in providing supports virtually in addition to in-person.
7. Document and disseminate new and emerging practices in job development, virtual job site supports, discovery, etc. LPOs have also adjusted many of the service methodologies of CIE. These innovations are worthy of study, documentation, and nationwide dissemination.

Personnel Development, including Direct Support Professionals

8. Create and sustain new Learning Communities and Collaboratives. In a time of crisis and rapid change, it is possible for LPOs to become isolated and lack information about effective new strategies and emerging innovations. NPOs and State and national government should create structures of communication and sharing of emerging new ideas and knowledge. Currently, some states are working to organize virtual and online communities of practice for discussion and sharing of both new problems and new solutions.
9. Continue to support and adequately fund CIE training, including requiring ACRE or CESP Certificates. In a time of such change, training and up-to-date information becomes even more important. States should prioritize and fund expanded training of employment support personnel.
10. Conduct an initial assessment to standardize skills, training, education requirements, and core competencies necessary to establish an occupational code to professionalize the support workforce, including Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

Technology

11. Fund and expand access to needed technology and devices, along with support to have access to gain skills in use of such technology. As the pandemic has unfolded, as noted above, lack of access to up-to-date technology devices has been exposed for people with disabilities and for support personnel.

Local Provider Organization Engagement

12. Promote the participation of LPO leadership as a prerequisite for increasing CIE services.
13. Create a straightforward and uncomplicated self-assessment as a means of determining a plan for increasing CIE services by individual LPOs.
14. Develop a template for specifying agreements for NPOs, LPOs, and SMEs that would indicate expectations, roles, and expected outcomes for efforts to increase CIE services.
15. Outline potential benefits that would accrue to LPOs if they took on efforts to increase CIE. This will allow LPOs in all parts of the country to understand and consider engaging in the processes for increasing CIE services.

Employer Engagement

16. Document emerging practices for employer relationships. LPOs have continued job development and employer engagement even during this pandemic. Virtual contacts now include communications with employers for both job development and employment supports. These emerging practices should be further developed, documented, and disseminated.

Family Engagement

17. Document and disseminate effective communication strategies with families about CIE. The need for new communication strategies with families and home support personnel have become apparent during the pandemic. This includes the need for new discussion about individualized and community focused employment opportunities and community based wraparound services.

18. Communicate about how congregation of people with disabilities is an integration issue (i.e., HCBS 2023), but now also a health and safety issue. Safety has become a more important topic in communication with people with disabilities and families in discussing congregate settings and CIE settings.

Continuing and Expanding Implementation of CIE

19. Sustain technical assistance and support to LPOs in expanding CIE, consistent with NEON's purpose. This becomes even more important at a time when congregating people now creates new and serious health and safety concerns.

Transition from School-to-Work

20. Expand access to school age integrated experiences in CIE and Pre-ETS, including access to and skills in technology and remote support devices (as noted above) that carries into adulthood. This also includes the need for opportunities for employment support providers to provide Pre-ETS.

Need for New Resources

21. Create and disseminate new operational resources for LPOs and their staff. There is a need to re-think and recreate knowledge and access to best practices and tools in this new environment.

The following proposed activities are aimed at:

- identifying best practices and resources used within our networks,
- creating a centralized and open-source repository to house these best practices and tools,
- disseminating access to these resources and knowledge to our networks,
- better preparing leadership and staff of local agencies for the challenges of tomorrow, and
- building an evidence-based case for making Medicaid/RSA funding more broadly available for remote/tech-based services.

Needed resources discussed in the NEON meetings include:

- Open-Source Resource Guide of Best Practices and New Innovations
- A White Paper on Community-Based Supports Post-COVID-19
- Collection of Case Studies of Innovative Agency Responses to COVID-19
- Collection of Organizational, Financial, and Human Resource Practices to Support Innovation in Provider Organizations
- Research and Documentation of State Agency Innovations and Creative Funding
- Document New, Emerging, and Innovative Staff Training and Professional Development

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

As a national network of provider organizations, NEON is in the unique position of understanding the challenges that the local-level affiliates face in expanding CIE. NEON is also able to equip them with the knowledge and promote the development of resources they need now and in the future. This was the case prior to the pandemic, and it is even more urgent in the context of changes to employment service delivery impacted by COVID-19. The original NEON process was altered to address these impacts, but it maintained the important overarching purpose to facilitate the expansion of CIE. The effects of the pandemic, while problematic, create new perspectives of how to deliver CIE services including new applications of technology, virtual supports, rethinking the safety of congregate services, and others as listed in the recommendations outlined above.

The five participating NPOs have committed to working together as a unified voice in advocacy for changes in CIE practice and policy, using the NEON structure to advance the necessary changes. NEON is designed to continue to use its structure over the next year to work with the NPOs and their affiliate organizations to continue to identify challenges to CIE implementation, to pursue policy changes that promote CIE, to facilitate the knowledge and resources to expand in-the-field effectiveness in delivering CIE service, and to continually document what it takes to increase access to and success in employment by individuals with disabilities.

APPENDIX A: NATIONAL PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATING IN NEON

Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE)

The mission of APSE is to advance employment equity for people with disabilities. APSE is the only national, non-profit membership organization dedicated to Employment First, a vision that all people with disabilities have a right to competitive employment in an inclusive workforce. APSE believes that people with disabilities should not work sequestered in sheltered workshops, earning only pennies an hour, but rather enjoy the company of a wide range of coworkers, an opportunity for greater financial independence, and the ability to contribute to the economy. APSE provides over 3,000 members and 37 state chapters with the tools, opportunities, and timely information needed to take action and build better workplaces through work with policymakers and employers. (<https://apse.org/>)

American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR)

ANCOR is a national, nonprofit trade association representing more than 1,600 private community providers of services to people with disabilities. Combined, its membership supports over one million individuals with disabilities which work to advance the ability of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to fully participate in their communities. ANCOR supports its member organizations obtain resources to: influence responsible federal public policy to protect and promote quality services; attract, expand and retain a quality workforce; equip providers and partners in understanding and responding to impacts, opportunities, emerging practices and trends; and shape the future of service delivery models and measures to ensure sustainable services.

(<https://www.ancor.org/>)

The Arc of the United States (The Arc)

The Arc is the largest national community-based organization advocating for and with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and serving them and their families. The Arc promotes and protects the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and actively supports their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes. With nearly 700 state and local chapters nationwide, The Arc works with its federation of state and local chapters to create a network of human service agencies which provides a wide range of human services and other supports to people with I/DD and their family members, including individual and public policy advocacy and residential, educational, and vocational services that let people with I/DD participate and be included in their communities. (<https://thearc.org/>)

ACCSES

ACCSES is a network of over 1,200 organizations that provide services to people with disabilities across the United States. Its vision is for all individuals with disabilities to have access to a full array of quality support and service options. ACCSES works to impact public policy to support this vision. Regarding employment, ACCSES advocates for public policies that foster better jobs, wages, and working conditions for individuals with disabilities, including individuals with the most significant disabilities. ACCSES is committed to defend individuals with disabilities' right to have access to employment options and opportunities that represent the fullest expression of their vocational strengths, priorities, needs, abilities, and capabilities. ACCSES works to address and impact public policy, build relationships with policymakers, collect and assess key information that directly impacts disability service providers, and leverage the collective efforts of its members to enhance the quality and types of services benefiting people with disabilities. (<https://accses.org/>)

SourceAmerica

SourceAmerica helps create jobs for people with disabilities by linking Federal customers who need products and services to a national network of nonprofits that employ a workforce of people with disabilities to provide them. It collaborates with key policymakers in the U.S. Congress and other Federal government leaders to protect and increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In addition to impacting legislation, SourceAmerica continuously comments on Federal rulemakings that will impact the U.S. AbilityOne Program, federal contracting, and employment for people with disabilities. SourceAmerica also fosters collaboration with other disability policy organizations. These partnerships bolster the voice on Capitol Hill to expand employment choices for people with disabilities.

(<https://www.sourceamerica.org/>)

APPENDIX B: NEON SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

- Abby Cooper, Kennedy Douglas Consulting
- Karen Lee, Supporting Employment Equality and Community (SEEC)
- Jeanine Pavlak, New England Business Associates
- Jackie Pogue, Westat
- Rachel Pollock, Job Path
- Dale Verstegen, TransCen, Inc.