

BUILDING, DEVELOPING, AND GOING TO SCALE:
GRANT FUNDED PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TOOL FOR NAVIGATING THE ROAD TO WORK

MODULE 2

THE CRITICAL CHOICE— PILOT VS. PROTOTYPE

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National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth

“The significant problems that we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when they were created.”

— Albert Einstein

MODULE 2: The Critical Choice—Pilot vs. Prototype

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies.

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Information on the Collaborative can be found at

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>.

Information about the Office of Disability Employment Policy can be found at

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP) has embarked on an ambitious youth-focused research initiative. Its primary purpose is to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities who are transitioning into workplace settings. Currently, the outcomes are poor, and have been so for some time.

The ODEP youth initiative presents states and local communities with an opportunity to reverse this trend for youth with disabilities. These grants, combined with ODEP’s funded technical assistance, can help non-profit public and private entities build a system of care for transitioning youth.

The rationale for this initiative is well justified. The outcomes for youth with disabilities continue to be unsatisfactory, in almost all areas. There is little likelihood that they will find meaningful employment as they begin the transition process. More disturbing, the lack of an organized system of support continues to hamper their chances of success. Numerous studies report problems addressing the transition needs of youth with disabilities through interagency collaboration and cooperation. Indeed, all ODEP grantees are no doubt aware that the following problems exist in many state and local systems:

- Lack of shared student information across agencies
- Lack of follow-up data on program recipients that could be used to improve efficiency and effectiveness
- Deficient interagency agreements
- Difficulty in predicting needed post-secondary services
- Minimized role for parents and student in decision-making
- Inefficient and ineffective management practices

Grantees should also understand that their participation in these initiatives are coming at a time when both government and philanthropic organizations are focusing their attention on the broader arena of “transition.” Although each of the

ODEP’s Mission

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership by developing and influencing disability-related employment policy as well as practice affecting the employment of people with disabilities.

Its vision is a world in which people with disabilities have unlimited employment opportunities.

ODEP serves as a catalyst for change through:

- Developing evidence-based employment solutions
- Delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities
- Guiding economic and social policy
- Building collaborative networks

ODEP youth projects have different emphases, they all share one thing in common: the charge to organize their work around evidence-based system neutral guiding principles and guideposts that help youth-serving institutions improve the transition process. For many youth at risk, entry into the new economy is nearly impossible. This includes young people leaving foster care, youth who are returning from juvenile justice facilities, and those who have chronic mental health concerns. There is an acknowledgement, based on credible evidence, that the discreet systems for these populations working in isolation are simply not effective. Further, the overlap between these high risk populations and youth with disabilities is considerable. In that sense, the grantees who are participating in the ODEP initiative are part of a much larger national process examining how the challenges for youth in transition can become opportunities. That implies that as a field of practice, the grantees, in collaboration with their state partners, can move towards a more comprehensive understanding of service delivery approaches, policy changes, funding strategies and desired outcomes.

The reality is that no one organization ever “owns” the transition responsibility. Multiple agencies are responsible for parts of the transition process. Success requires building cross-agency partnerships – based upon the guideposts – to affect multiple delivery systems.

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Like most well-intended reform initiatives, ODEP's youth initiative has created a high level of excitement, especially among veteran service providers. The initial reports from the grantees regarding their progress are very positive. Though it is still too early to identify any specific effective practices, there are undoubtedly several promising approaches. Although one common element of these approaches is that they are mostly centered on direct services, the key point is that agencies, intermediaries, and workforce development systems will need to craft new collaborative arrangements that include representation by human services, employers, business, education, vocational rehabilitation and young people. Again, this becomes especially relevant in light of a broader, national level of attention.

Grantees, currently or in the near future, will be approaching the critical stage of determining how to take their work to scale, how to build strategic collaborative relationships, how to blend and braid resources, and how to sustain their work past the grant

period. This document is being prepared as a technical assistance tool for grantees and their sub-grantees. It is part of an overall strategy to support the work of grantees entering these critical stages.

These modules reflect a combination of established practices from human systems and educational reform, successful business models, and responses to insightful questions raised by ODEP's grantees. Even though their original purpose was to support the efforts of the ODEP's grantees, the information contained in the modules have utility for anyone involved in workforce development system, state agencies working with youth in transition, policy makers and any public or private funders interested in innovative, collaborative youth development efforts. The modules are not meant to provide a step-by-step approach, nor should they imply any linear process. Instead they offer a straightforward overview of the complex and deliberate interactions and coordination needed to effectively fulfill our collective responsibility to improve the well-being of youth with disabilities.

THE CRITICAL CHOICE: PILOT VS. PROTOTYPE

The ODEP guideposts represent a synthesis of the most promising practices. However, the reality is that it is not possible to find any state or community that has been able to fully incorporate all of the features into a comprehensive transition system for all youth. There continues to be clear evidence that vulnerable youth are the least well-served in making the transition to the adult world. And, much remains to be learned about what specific techniques, strategies, settings, organizational conditions, and services are the most efficient and effective and should be continued.

Most grant-funded initiatives get their start in what funders call a pilot. These pilots are launched with great fanfare and even greater promise. Unfortunately, these pilots are often not sustained. The landscape of human services is littered with pilot programs that

never lasted past the first three years of grant funding. Though the term pilot is somewhat arbitrary, the activities surrounding pilot programs are generally quite predictable. For example, some pilot projects focus on research and the testing of evidence-based practices. However, most of these activities occur in the building cycle of an initiative. Subsequent to this cycle, not much happens to assist in enhancing the effort or in taking it to scale. Indeed, most pilot projects and human services are designed to attain their goals by way of a beginning, middle and an end – the success of which seems to be the completion of the process.

Consideration should be given to another model, a prototype, which is designed to maintain the services to youth, by way of a sustainable process. The success of the prototype is seen in its continuation. The

Building, Developing and Going to Scale PROTOTYPE CYCLES

BUILDING TASKS

- Creating an advisory panel/guiding the strategic planning
- Establishing a vision
- Develop a work plan
- Environmental scan
- Determining the number of youth to be served
- Clarifying what current and future resources will be needed
- Establish clarity about “best practices”
- Agree on a prototype
- Work with staff to communicate the vision, mission, and service strategies
- Build the process for identifying deviations from the plan

DEVELOPING TASKS

- Begin experimenting with a prototype
- Developing a mechanism for family/youth involvement
- Developing a plan for an evaluation process
- Creating opportunities for cross-systems collaboration
- Creating an infrastructure for governance, management and operations
- Creating a flexible funding strategy and plan to initiate a prototype
- Consensus on the desired outcome
- Developing a technical assistance/professional development plan

GOING TO SCALE

- Refine the prototype
- Developing a ongoing learning community for regular adjustments
- Create a mechanism for evaluation reporting
- Implement technical assistance/professional development plan
- Implement long-range funding strategy
- Eliminate the ineffective, isolated services
- Clarify the “value added” of the new model

Starting with a prototype model allows for system-building as a priority.

prototype should represent what the grantee eventually wants the service strategy to be, in line with available resources and serving the realistic numbers of young people who are eligible.

The prototype should prove or disprove the viability of the strategy that the grantees are testing and determining whether or not the strategy is sustainable. Most importantly, a prototype has the capacity to do something with which pilots rarely if ever concern themselves: it can allow opportunities for the consumers to indicate whether or not the service strategy makes sense. Over the building, developing and going to scale cycles, the regiment of tasks for sustaining the initiative are much clearer with a prototype approach.

Prototypes encourage the implementation of effective practices and promising approaches, so that taking the initiative to scale with blended funding, can be justified.

Traditional pilot programs have notable drawbacks. For example, there is no cost or policy consequence for not participating or contributing to the pilot. Sometimes within a “collaborative” pilot project the leadership can lapse and there is no obligation to re-bid large service contracts. As a consequence of these drawbacks, it is less likely that effective practices will be taken to scale.

With pilots, waivers might or might not be part of the process. Prototypes, on the other hand, force decisions, such as the need for a Medicaid waiver, if the initiative is to go to scale and be sustained. Finally, pilot projects, which depend entirely on a time-limited grant, allow the partners to avoid the most difficult of all political decisions – what not to fund. Building a continuum of support for youth in transition implies that some traditionally less integrated approaches will no longer be needed. And since there are only so many resources to go around, something will have to be sacrificed. A strong prototype process will provide the cover that decision-makers need to make those decisions. This is the highly charged issue that most state departments

will avoid, until they simply do not have any money left to support the initiative. In essence, starting with the prototype allows for *system-building* as a priority. As such, the grantees might want to consider the corresponding responsibilities that accompany the prototype approach.

Prototypes have the following distinct characteristics:

Prototypes should begin “tinkering” as soon as possible— they need early and frequent modification.

Often, human services agencies take a significant amount of time to develop a pilot which forces an unnecessary expenditure of funds prior to when the actual service delivery occurs. In business settings, it is preferred that the prototype is up and running as soon as is possible. Because time represents the “burning” of investor resources for a business, there is more of a sense of urgency. In the case of ODEP’s initiatives, the youth are the human service parallel to customers, investors and the available capital and resources. Having said this, grantees should not ignore critical tasks associated with the planning process, nor should they ignore a reasonable period of community consultation. The appropriate balance exists in a timely introduction of a well-researched, realistic and measurable approach that can be refined through consumer input.

In business literature, the initial design of a project is sometimes referred to as a pilot and, in many cases, is never actually seen by the public. However, because business is customer driven, the response is to make frequent modifications of the initial design, which eventually evolves into a successful prototype. The caveat for all ODEP grantees: even though there is value to “having something out there” quickly for discussion, retaining room to make improvements and to make the “product” more appealing is key to a successful prototype.

Partners and grantees need to avoid the temptation to institutionalize one particular service delivery model too quickly. The successful prototype needs to be accompanied by a learning environment, which allows

QUICK TIP Want to Build a Successful Prototype? Choose Function Over Form...

By looking at other essential tasks that need to be done early on during the building phase of the successful prototype:

In the initiative's first six months, sub-grantees can identify any agency regulations that are impeding collaboration. Grantees can use their local intermediary to gain consensus from the local partners on impeding regulations and then present as one voice to state counterparts.

At the same time, have local and state partners develop common intake forms recognized by everyone involved, as well as processes for shared common assessments and common individualized plans for all youth (regardless of which program finally provides the fiscal support).

the partners to build practical applications of the model based on informed self-evaluation.

Prototype partners and grantees need to establish a regular process for making early and frequent modifications to the initial prototype. There is no one mechanism for capturing the input and refining the elements of a prototype. However, since parent and youth involvement is both a mainstay and a requirement of transition programs, establishing a process for participation should come naturally. Once in place, the stakeholders should guide the analysis and the review and refinement process. With no more than 10 to 12 individuals, along with full staff support, the group should be willing to invest a good deal of time early on in the development phase. This will reduce the likelihood or the need for intervention later in the process.

Stakeholders will need to consider reviewing the initial project prototype every 90 days during its first year and at least bi-annually thereafter. And, this can be done by establishing a regular process for soliciting consistent feedback from grantees' two primary customers: youth/families and employers and by asking and answering key questions that any successful business asks:

- What does the customer think about the product?
- What does the customer want from the product?
- What changes/additions can we reasonably make to the product to satisfy the customer?

Prototypes should provide the partners with an opportunity to move beyond procedural compliance alone, to achieve positive outcomes and build the permanent teams necessary to take the effort to scale.

Traditionally, the categorical approaches of education, social services and vocational rehabilitation have been limited in their success because there has been such an emphasis on eligibility and entitlement compliance. As a result, the young person either has to fit the guidelines or has to "know the secret handshake." This obsession with compliance is agency-focused but not youth-centered. A "no-wrong-door" approach and commitment on the part of the partners can turn the tables. For example, ODEP grantees can be proactive by providing their sites with the support they need to build a system based on access. The prototype is exactly the place where professional helpers and youth can come to an agreement on how to tailor services in a way that assures an improvement in the outcomes for youth. Strict adherence to form over function should never be at the expense of reducing opportunities for innovation and effective practice in the field. Remember: pilots can easily become "automatic pilot" whereas prototypes encourage the creative process because they are customer-centered.

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