
The SourceAmerica Pathways to Careers Demonstration in Utah: Interim Evaluation Report Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The SourceAmerica Pathways to Careers (Pathways) initiative relies upon state-of-the-art employment strategies to enable people with significant disabilities to have an informed choice of competitive, integrated, full-wage employment options that match their individual skills, interests, and abilities. In this report, we document the activities of the Utah Pathways project and the experiences of project participants from the time Pathways first began accepting applications in May 2012, through October 2015. During that time the project enrolled 67 participants. This is the first of two primary reports that will describe the findings of the Pathways evaluation. The evaluation is based on information collected from the program management information system, participant applications and follow-up surveys conducted 6, 12, and 24 months after intake, and interviews with staff and employers participating in Pathways.

Pathways model

The key Pathways service components designed to promote informed choice of employment are a discovery process, paid work experiences, customized job development, benefits counseling, case management, on-the-job supports for participants, and supports for employers to hire Pathways participants. The Pathways service model was developed by SourceAmerica in consultation with Marc Gold & Associates. The combination of Pathways service components has not been implemented previously. The overarching goal of Pathways is for each participant to achieve meaningful, community-based employment. The specific objectives of the project are to:

- Provide an informed choice of one or more internship or employment opportunities that match participants' strengths and interests, are compatible (or can be accommodated) with their communication, sensory, and social skills, and are designed to result in community-based, integrated employment.
- Support the active and continuing participation of employers that offer a wide range of integrated, community-based, full-wage internship and regular-status job opportunities.
- Integrate employment and behavioral/mental health services for participants (as appropriate) and provide all needed ongoing employment supports.
- Provide appropriate support and assistance to participants and employers to ensure job retention and advancement.
- Provide ongoing assistance and career planning and development services to participants and employers.

The four key service components that were implemented for the Utah Pathways cohorts analyzed in this report include the following:

Initial discovery. Initial discovery is a competency-based, qualitative look at the participant. Pathways staff members gather information about the participant in order to be able to translate his or her life skills into job skills and into potential contributions to employers. The

objective is to develop a complete picture of the participant—one that goes beyond the types of assessments that would be conducted in a typical employment program. Over the course of 10 to 12 weeks, Pathways staff members seek to identify each individual's best performance in his or her life by engaging the participant in approximately 10 to 15 discovery sessions, each lasting one to two hours. The information is used to develop a foundation for the employment relationship. Initial discovery culminates with an internship planning meeting, during which, the career navigator facilitates a discussion with the participant and his or her family to identify the ideal characteristics of an environment for work. The objective of the meeting is to develop criteria for an internship that would mesh well with the participant.

Internships and expanded discovery. During the expanded discovery, the Pathways participant can experience one or more full- or part-time internships. The internships are typically for jobs which the employers are seeking (or frequently seek) permanent employees at wages above the highest applicable minimum wage. Through the paid internship process, the participant and Pathways staff develop a greater experience base from which to make decisions about employment and a better understanding of a participant's career interests, conditions for success, and job-related contributions. These internships foster development of job skills and showcase the intern's abilities to an employer. The salary, fringe benefits, and any employment supports (for example, job coaching and transportation) during the internship are provided by Pathways, not the employer.

At the conclusion of the internship, an employment support plan, which outlines the employment supports needed by the participant and their costs, is finalized with the active involvement of the participant and employer. The employer is also made aware of the EPTA which the employer will receive if an offer of employment is made to—and accepted by—the participant. If offered a regular-status job by the internship employer, the participant may choose to pursue permanent employment with that organization, in which case Pathways staff would help him or her negotiate hours and wages. Alternatively, the participant may decide to explore another internship opportunity.

Employment and the employer payroll tax adjustment (EPTA). Another key component of the Pathways service model is employment in an integrated setting in the community (that is, not in a sheltered workshop). If a Pathways participant accepts an offer of employment, the employer will be responsible for providing customary wages and fringe benefits and all needed employment supports. Employers that hire Pathways participants are eligible for simulated EPTA payments of from \$167 to \$583 per month for each Pathways participant they hire who works and earns at least \$750 per month. Four EPTA amounts are available, depending on a participant's earnings and whether he or she is enrolled in a health plan sponsored by the employer. The EPTA amounts are based on estimates of how much money the federal government would save on programs for people with disabilities when a Pathways participant becomes employed. In Utah, Pathways will provide the EPTA to the employer for a period of up to five years from the date of the Pathways participant's employment, as long as the participant continues to be employed.

Post-employment career support. A final key component of the Pathways model is ongoing, post-employment career support. Once a Pathways participant has accepted an offer of employment, Pathways staff members continue to work with her or him to support the ongoing success and growth of the employed participant's career.

In Utah, Pathways is being implemented by the Pioneer Adult Rehabilitation Center (PARC) in Clearfield, Utah. Following a year of development and training, PARC began accepting applications in May 2012. Pathways service intake started two months later.

Recruitment and participant characteristics

Individuals are eligible for Utah Pathways if they are age 18 or older, have a diagnosis of autism or an intellectual or developmental disability, and reside in Davis County, Utah. Participants are recruited from three sources: PARC's facility-based employment program, the Davis County School System transition programs, and the waiting list for the Medicaid community supports waiver for individuals with intellectual disabilities or other related conditions. Recruitment for the first four Pathways cohorts occurred from 2012 to 2014. During this period, Pathways conducted outreach to 547 individuals from three referral sources, resulting in 129 eligible applicants. Offers to join Pathways were randomly extended to 70 of the applicants, of whom 67 accepted and 64 became participants by attending at least one initial discovery session. Eight more were randomly selected as alternates after individuals declined to participate or dropped out of the program. The average age of participants was 29 years old, and most had obtained a high school diploma. At the time of application about one-third were working and one-third were enrolled in school; among those who were working, most were in facility-based jobs. All were white but one, all had become disabled at a young age, and nearly all reported difficulties with activities of daily living (ADL). Most participants received Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits, typically SSI; only about one-fifth were engaged with vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. About one-half of participants lived in households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000. Although most participants saw themselves working in the future, only a minority had recent jobs at the time of application, and among those who did, earnings were low, averaging about \$350 per month.

Services

Pathways participants spent an average of 14 weeks in initial discovery, during which time their assigned career navigators help them translate their unique life skills into job skills. The culmination of this component of the project for a participant is an internship planning meeting in which the career navigator documents the participant's strengths. Participants then move into the expanded discovery phase of the project, during which they usually engage in up to three internships. The median wait for placement into the first internship was 15 weeks. The long wait for internships was due to the challenge in finding appropriate internship opportunities; Pathways-affiliated employers could not always offer the range of internships necessary, and so new employers had to be identified and recruited. Internships lasted an average of 9 weeks, and participants spent an average of 157 hours in an internship. A Pathways internship facilitator might be present at an internship site for all the hours that a participant is there or for only a small fraction of these hours, depending on the needs of the participant for on-the-job support.

On average, 31 percent of the internship time involved on-the-job support. Average staff on-site support time declined markedly after the first month of the internship.

During the first three years, participants completed 76 internships, 24 of which resulted in offers of employment and 15 of which were accepted. Participants who accepted job offers worked an average of 26 hours per week and earned an average of \$9.78 per hour and \$1,161 per month. EPTA payments totaling about \$45,000 were paid based on the work activity of 7 of the employed participants. Pathways staff view these employment outcomes as successes; nevertheless, they have identified some challenges to participant employment. These included, in some cases, the inability of employers to hire successful interns due to the lack of appropriate certifications held by the interns, insufficient funds on the part of the employers, and the need to customize many of the internships for participants so that they matched their skills and interests.

Participant outcomes and experiences

The percentage of participants working for pay rose substantially at the 6- and 12-month follow-ups, largely due to participation in Pathways internships. They worked at those jobs an average of 20 hours per week. By the 24-month follow-up, we found no difference in the employment rate compared with the rate at application, but average monthly earnings had increased by \$235 relative to their earnings at application. This was accompanied by a \$161 reduction in average monthly disability benefits. The lack of a change in the share employed at 24-months is in part due to the relatively high employment rates at application among the PARC-referred participants who were working in PARC's facility-based employment program when they applied to Pathways.

Employer experiences

The efforts of project staff to forge relationships with employers are vital to creating appropriate internship opportunities for Pathways participants. As of October 2015, those efforts resulted in 55 employers making formal commitments to participate in Pathways by providing internships and possibly paid jobs. Broadly speaking, the participating employers welcomed the opportunity to engage with their community through Pathways. The fact that the project would be shouldering of the cost of paying interns plus the provision of the EPTA to eligible employers were concrete factors in employers' decisions to participate. They also viewed the on-site support by Pathways staff as a useful and important project feature.

Conclusions

Although Pathways can cite many accomplishments during its first three years of operation, the project continues to face and address important challenges. Intensive training on the Pathways service model is required of all staff; furthermore, it takes a great deal of on-the-job application of that training for staff to become proficient in conducting initial discovery, placing participants in internships, and providing ongoing support. Staff turnover can be problematic and has been so in the past, although it appears to be less so currently. Another ongoing challenge is finding appropriate internship opportunities for participants. Staff noted that the need to find or customize a good match for participants frequently created bottlenecks. This underscores the

need for the project to continuously increase the number of affiliated employers and for staff to continue to be assertive and creative in working with employers to carve out or otherwise identify appropriate internship opportunities for participants.

A formal cost analysis is underway as part of the Pathways evaluation, but at this early point, project costs are seemingly high relative to the employment outcomes achieved. The work of 9 to 11 FTE project staff resulted in 46 individuals completing a total of 76 paid work experiences, and the employment of 15 participants in regular-status jobs in the community during the project's first three years. Additional significant costs include approximately \$99,000 in payments to participants while they were in internships, and about \$45,000 in EPTA payments to employers. The seemingly high costs of the project, combined with small numbers of permanent job placements, might suggest that the Pathways model cannot be cost-beneficial. However, if the 24-month outcomes observed to date are indicative of the potential impacts of the program, and if such impacts can be sustained, Pathways has the potential to generate significant savings to the federal government. The average 22 percent reductions in SSI and SSDI cash benefits observed at the 24-month follow-up, if sustained, translate into average lifetime reductions of about \$39,000 per participant. Additional savings to Medicare and Medicaid would accrue if participants are offered, and opt into, employer-sponsored health plans. Given the potentially large average lifetime public expenditures associated with SSI and SSDI beneficiaries with intellectual disabilities, substantial and effective investments in paid work experiences and career development might pay for themselves in the long run, especially if they are targeted to young adults.

Pathways is still a new and evolving service model. The findings presented in this report are only suggestive of the impacts the program might achieve on the informed employment choice, earnings, public income support benefits, and economic well-being of participants. As Pathways expands, there may be opportunities to more rigorously evaluate its effectiveness and potential to become a critical component of a broader strategy to slow the growth in the SSI and SSDI disability rolls and improve the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism.

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