CECY: California's collaborative approach to increasing employment of youth and young adults with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Collaboratives have been shown to be effective at addressing complex problems and powerful drivers of systems change (Chrislip, 2002). The intractable problem of low employment for youth and young adults (YYA) with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) cannot be solved by one agency alone.

OBJECTIVE: This article describes the California Employment Consortium for Youth with IDD ("CECY") and its impact in California.

CONCLUSION: The California Employment Consortium for Youth with IDD was an alliance of 45 representatives from 25 local and state agencies, associations, organizations, families, and self-advocates committed to building capacity and partnerships among state and local agencies and stakeholders to foster meaningful, sustainable changes in the systems that support YYA with IDD to achieve employment. Guiding this work were two models for change, the High Performing States Framework, that identifies effective elements for employment systems change; and Collaborative Leadership, a process to constructively engage diverse stakeholders in dialogue, mutual learning, shared responsibility, and action. This article describes the organization, administration, strategic actions, outcomes, and lessons learned from implementing a state level systems change project.

Keywords: Developmental disabilities, collaborative leadership, employment, systems change

1. Introduction

For decades throughout the nation, the employment for youth and young adults (YYA) with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (IDD) has been intractably low. In 2011, California (CA) was one of 8 states to successfully compete for a Partnerships in Employment Systems Change grant from the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An underlying assumption of this initiative was that a shifting and realignment of policies that influence the structures and operations of states' surrounding employment systems needed to occur for significant improvements in the employment of people with disabilities (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang 2007). To this end, the California Employment Consortium for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities ("CECY") was established with the mission to

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stimulate policy change and build capacity in CA state systems and local communities to increase the number of individuals with IDD in competitive integrated employment (CIE). CECY's goals were to: 1) Strengthen interagency collaborations and practices between and among local and state agencies to increase opportunities for CIE; 2) Enhance the understanding of YYA, family members, and professionals of the effective practices and supports for YYA with IDD to work in CIE; and 3) Effect policy change at the state and local level aimed at increasing the employment of YYA with IDD. This article describes CECY and its use of the High Performing States Framework (Hall, Butterworth, Winsor, Gilmore, & Metzel, 2007) and Collaborative Leadership (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) approach to build capacity and partnerships among state agencies and stakeholders to foster meaningful, sustainable changes in the systems that support YYA with IDD.

2. Background

2.1. California context

For nearly 50 years, CA's Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act ("Act") has entitled qualified individuals with IDD to an array of services and supports to live and participate in their own communities. The Act is codified in the California Welfare and Institutions Code (Welfare and Institutions Code Sections 4500 et seq.). Under the Act, the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) contracts with 21 independent community based non-profit regional centers throughout CA to provide service coordination and a variety of community services and supports that meet the needs and choices of individuals with IDD (The Scan Foundation, 2013; Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act and Related Laws, 2017).

In 2016, the regional center system served approximately 300,000 individuals with IDD, of which 85,921 received employment (work activity, group or supported employment) or day services. The majority (77%) attended day programs that typically do not provide or provide limited access to employment opportunities. Few regional center clients (5%) received individual employment services for CIE. Sixteen percent of regional center clients, 16–64 years old, had earned income although most earned subminimum wages (60%). The average annual earnings of the regional center clients were $7,248 (Regional Center Oversight Dashboard, 2017;

Developmental Services Task Force Workgroup on Housing and Employment, 2016).[1]

It took 6 years and multiple attempts for the state to adopt an Employment First Policy in 2013. According to state law, "...It is the policy of the state that opportunities for integrated competitive employment shall be given the highest priority for working age individuals with developmental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities. This policy shall be known as the Employment First Policy" (Welfare and Institutions Code § 4869(a), 2013). In addition, the law provided a definition and measurement for "integrated competitive employment" (competitive, self-employment, and microenterprise). It also required employment be the first option for working age adults considered by regional center planning teams. Individuals 16 and older are to be informed of the policy and opportunities related to achieving integrated competitive employment, including needed supports and postsecondary education.

However, it was only very recently that CIE became a measurable outcome rather than simply a provided service. In 2016, after decades of service cuts, funding reductions and frozen provider rates in the DD system, new funding was made available for employment services, a paid internship program, and incentive payments for placement, and retention in CIE (Welfare and Institutions Code § 4870, 2016).

In addition to DDS, the CA Departments of Education (CDE) and Rehabilitation (DOR) also have responsibilities toward the preparation, placement and long term employment supports for individuals with IDD. In 2014, the 3 agencies, in collaboration with Disability Rights California (DRC), signed a historic agreement to establish and implement an interagency plan, the California Competitive Integrated Employment Blueprint for Change ("Blueprint"). The primary goal of the Blueprint is to increase the number of individuals with IDD who achieve CIE using existing resources through: (1) collaboration and coordination between the three agencies; and for individuals with IDD to have, (2) increased opportunities to prepare for and participate in the workforce development system and (3) to make informed choices, prepare for and transition to CIE. The plan and its implementation are

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[1] The average earnings was calculated from the wages reported by employers for all regional center clients. This included clients who had or had not receive employment services. The data excluded individuals who were self employed or independent contractors.

consistent with other federal laws and mandates for education and employment including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Home and Community Based Services Settings Rule (California Department of Education, California Department of Rehabilitation, California Department of Developmental Services, 2016). The Blueprint establishes for the first time benchmarks and expectations for CIE, delineates roles and responsibilities for each agency, and outlines how individuals with IDD will be informed of the opportunities available for CIE. The Blueprint was finalized in May 2017 and released in English and six threshold languages (Spanish, Chinese, Armenian, Russian, Vietnamese, and Tagalog).

3. Organizational approach

This section describes the two frameworks that helped lay the groundwork for CECY's focus and process for building capacity for change.

3.1. High Performing States Framework (HPS)

There are a myriad of factors that may impact the employment of YYA with IDD. The HPS Framework offers an understanding of the effective strategies implemented in states that had achieved high rates of integrated employment and/or high growth in CIE. It is based on systems thinking which views the context (employment system), catalysts (values, leadership, and key stakeholders), strategies implemented, and outcomes as multidirectional, interconnected, and interdependent. Strategies include flexibility and innovations in: 1) policy and clarity of goals; 2) financing; 3) training and technical assistance; 4) service innovation; and 5) accountability and collection of outcome data. Within the HPS model, the catalysts and context (stakeholders, values, goals, and commitment) facilitate the implementation of systemic strategies that lead to successful goal achievement in employment. Given the complexity of systems transformation, the HPS model was used to assist the consortium to create a shared understanding of the key elements of high performing state employment systems. The framework served as a practical guide toward establishing priorities. We also used the HPS framework to categorize strategies implemented by CECY members as indicators of progress.

3.2. CECY process: Collaborative leadership

A complex and multifaceted issue such as employment cannot be addressed by single leaders or agencies alone, and requires leadership that cuts across organizational boundaries. CECY adopted the approach of collaborative leadership to break down traditional silos, foster cross-agency activities, and create an environment that fosters creativity and innovation. The central premise of collaborative leadership is "if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways, with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for accessing the shared concerns of the organization or community" (Chrislip & Larson, 1994, p. 4). Collaborative leaders need to be effective in building relationships and trust; facilitating complex processes; and working across cultural, ideological, social, and organizational differences. They need to be skillful in: understanding each other's motivations for collaboration; making complex situations comprehensible and workable; helping groups develop shared visions and actionable plans; working with and through conflict; assessing the environment for change and determining who to partner with; sharing and redistributing power; drawing out the passions of the members; sharing credit; having patience, tenacity, and empathy; holding difficult conversations and coalition building (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Chrislip, 2002; Asher & Cameron, 2013). Some leaders are present at the beginning of a collaborative; others emerge or develop over time. These leaders also serve as vital link between the collaborative and stakeholders, including formal decision making bodies and those responsible for implementation within their own organizations, agencies, councils or programs.

4. Components of the consortium

4.1. Membership

CECY was a collaboration of 45 representatives from 25 local and state agencies, associations, organizations, families, and self-advocates with responsibilities for the education, preparation, support, and employment of YYA with IDD. Organizations and agencies represented included the Departments of Rehabilitation, Education, and Developmental Services, the State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights California, the Tarjan Center at UCLA, a University Center for Excellence

in Developmental Disabilities, Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA), California Transition Alliance, The Arc of California, and the California Foundation for Independent Living. The majority of members had their own professional networks including councils, committees, parent groups, self-advocacy networks, or other associations that could also serve as a catalyst for change. In addition, some CECY members were also leaders from other important state initiatives designed for the improvement of employment outcomes of individuals with IDD, including CaPROMISE (Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income) and California's Disability Employment Initiative (DEI).

4.2. Workgroups, youth advisory committee and local employment collaborative teams

CECY's workgroups were established based on a priority setting process conducted by the Consortium. They were informed by identified barriers to CIE and strategies from the HPS. We clustered activities into five workgroups, who were named by their members: policy ("The Policy Change Artists"), best practices ("America's Next Top Models"), state data and performance indicators ("Data Nerds"), outreach and communication ("the Outreachers"), and resource development ("the Unbroken Chain"). Table 1 shows the workgroups and their corresponding objectives.

CECY members joined one or more groups of their choosing. Each workgroup was co-chaired by "LEADS" who were each from different representative agencies or organizations. CECY members regularly reviewed and updated priorities, timelines, accomplishments, and deliverables of the workgroups.

Often, members from one workgroup participated in other workgroups when the issues being addressed were related. For example, the "Policy Change Artists" and "Data Nerds" worked together to develop policy recommendations for data sharing

to ascertain the number of individuals with IDD who were employed and receiving specific services. The "Outreachers" and "Unbroken Chain" also had a reciprocal relationship, and were often in communication sharing their findings and resource compilation. By the 4th and 5th years, these two workgroups were combined.

CECY established a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) in October 2012. YAC formally met for one year as a stand-alone advisory committee to CECY. Members provided insight on the priorities and perspectives of youth with disabilities, and offered substantive input on CECY related products and priorities. Over the last 5 years, 5 YAC members attended quarterly meetings and 1 member regularly participated in the policy workgroup. Facilitation for the YAC was provided by a young professional with a disability with extensive experience in youth leadership among youth with disabilities. YAC members provided direct input into the work of CECY, and insight into both the aspirations of YAA with IDD and systemic barriers encountered by them. These youths were also encouraged to take actions that equipped them to achieve CIE; several have successfully obtained internships, employment, or are in the process of attending college.

A final component of CECY was the Local Employment Collaborative Teams (LECTS). CECY conducted a call for local, successful, and collaborative practices to gain further understanding of the complex interdependencies between policy, practice, and community resources in the achievement of CIE for YYA with IDD. In January 2012, seven programs were selected for their successful strategies, as well as their geographic and contextual differences, to partner with CECY's state activities and policy work. Each program was awarded a total of $30,000 over 2 years to document their practices. The selected agencies and organizations represented 4 secondary schools, 1 college, and 2 providers that each had a unique focus: job supports with effective

Table 1
CECY workgroups and objectives

Workgroup	Objectives
Policy Change Artists	To assess current policies and practices within and across agencies and make recommendations to advance CIE.
Data Nerds	To create a go-to website for professionals and families that displays employment and related data from various sources in a user-friendly way.
Outreachers	To better understand the expectations and need for resources and information by families and teachers in transition to postsecondary education and/or employment.
America's Next Top Models	To uncover and disseminate effective practices from diverse local communities that demonstrate success at achieving CIE.
Unbroken Chain	To create a resource tool for transition from school to work for YYA with IDD.

job matching, occupational certificates, community partnerships, use of technology for job searching and applications, parent and family involvement in job placement, benefits planning training, interagency collaboration, and sequenced funding and braided services. By the end of the second year, all of the LECTs reported employment rates above the California rate of 12–13%; the percentage of LECT participants employed in integrated settings ranged from 16% to 100%.

Each LECT also served as the lead convener for a local Community Conversation event. A Community Conversation is an evidence-based method (adapted from the World Café format) for creatively engaging diverse individuals in collaborative dialogue to generate fresh ideas, solutions, and action steps around improving an issue (Swedeen, Cooney, Moss, & Carter, 2011).

CECY staff provided the technical assistance, training, facilitation, and evaluation for planning and executing these events. Each community was encouraged to outreach to employers with and without experience in working with/hiring individuals with disabilities. Four hundred thirty-one community members, including over 80 employers, participated in the events; including representatives from chamber of commerce, higher education, local business, service organizations, civic groups, as well as elected/local officials, religious leaders, families, and YYA with IDD.

4.3. Administration

The overall management of CECY was the responsibility of the Tarjan Center at UCLA and staffed by its Director, Communications and Program Manager, and Project Evaluator. The Center provided the administration, leadership, and coordination for CECY and its operations; developed meeting agendas/desired outcomes; supported all workgroups; facilitated information sharing among members; developed an internal CECY member website and weekly CECY E-News; finalized and disseminated accessible products; and managed logistics for virtual and in-person meetings. Five subject matter consultants (including previous state or local agency directors) were directly involved or co-led a workgroup. Additional subject matter consultation in school-to-work transition was received through Vision Quest, a 10-month technical assistance grant CECY received in 2014 from the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor.

AIDD also provided technical assistance to each of the awarded Partnerships in Employment System's change grantees through the Institute for Community Inclusion and National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services. Their staff provided a national context, content expertise, and sharing of information across projects.

CECY held monthly webinar meetings and quarterly all day in-person meetings. Meetings were held in the state capitol, Sacramento, to make attendance of state agency leadership possible. Meeting space was provided by state agencies or the local regional center.

The co-chairs of the workgroups, the "LEADS," also met monthly to review the progress of their workgroups and products and to discuss their priorities, activities, and needs. CECY utilized a professional facilitator for our quarterly meetings who guided the process in accordance with the principles of Collaborative Leadership. The desired outcomes and content for each meeting was developed by a leadership team, including the director and "LEADS" of each of the workgroups. Quarterly all day meetings were highly participatory, using small and large group format for processing information and making decisions. Commonly, the morning activities were dedicated to agency updates, topical trainings, and information sharing. The afternoons often structured dedicated time for workgroup meetings. In years 4 and 5, CECY received regular updates and provided consultation toward the development of the Blueprint at each meeting. For example, ideas and recommendations were provided toward: a career portfolio; creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between local agencies for CIE; and strategies for effective partnerships with local America Job Centers.

The Consortium and its process was evaluated through several methods including Tarjan Center developed in-person meeting evaluations, online in-depth surveys on a quarterly/biannual basis, and an annual Partnership Self-Assessment Tool (2002). Evaluations were used to establish priorities, professional development needs, and assess barriers to implementation. CECY was required to submit biannual evaluation data to an external evaluator of all the Partnerships in Employment projects.

5. Strategic actions, activities and outcomes

CECY developed a set of five strategic actions to guide and develop activities to achieve the goals and objectives of CECY work groups. These actions and

their corresponding activities build heavily upon the HPS Framework and CA's unique context to support a systemic shift toward CIE.

Strengthening ties within CECY and its partnering agencies, families, and YYA with IDD. This refers to the work within the Consortium to develop leadership, foster innovation, and ensure individual and agency commitment. The meetings were designed to encourage relationship building, sharing of knowledge, problem solving of issues, cross-agency communication and collaboration, and support for implementation of CIE within member organizations and local communities.

Impacting public policies and practices that support CIE. This strategic action addressed CECY's focus on removing policy and practice barriers as well as promoting systems change. This included conducting reviews and analyses of current state policies, administrative and funding structures and services provided by the three primary state agencies, DDS, CDE, and DOR. These reviews formed the basis for policy briefs and other informational materials intended for policy makers and professionals. CECY's policy efforts were directed towards the successful passage of Employment First Policy and Self Determination law, and the full funding of the DD system.

The Employment First Policy represented an important philosophical shift for California and a clear message that individuals with IDD have the right to make an informed choice about working. While this policy was an important starting point, it did not require fundamental changes to the regional center system to ensure its implementation or outcomes. Such change would require an examination of all facets of the system from the services provided, funding structures, provider capacity, and data management. CECY provided invaluable assistance to the state through its systemic review, recommended strategies, documentation of successful practices and successful model of cross agency collaboration.

On a local level, CECY worked to advance the implementation of Employment First by identifying regional examples of successful practices. CECY's LECTS served as regional exemplars in the preparation, support and achievement of CIE by people with IDD. Individual regional centers also began to adopt their own Employment First Policy. The Regional Center of Orange County (RCOC), represented on CECY by its Director and leadership staff, were early adopters of a local Employment First Policy. CECY provided RCOC technical assistance regarding shutting the door to segregated work, data collection, and preparing and educating the community for CIE.

It was not until the agreement to establish the Blueprint that the state agencies began planning for the coordination and structural changes needed in the system to achieve the vision of the Employment First Policy. There was a dynamic interplay between the resources and expertise of CECY and the development of the Blueprint as the individuals drafting the Blueprint were also CECY members. CECY was uniquely positioned to be useful for addressing the myriad of issues associated with moving Employment First policy into practice.

Raising expectations for CIE and expanding youth and family involvement. CECY focused on raising the aspirations and expectations of families, providers, professionals, employers, and other community members for CIE. Parents and educators were surveyed to understand their post-school expectations for postsecondary education and employment for their youths with IDD. Families, individuals with IDD, and professionals wanted and benefitted from stories of success and resources to envision and support a future for YYA that included CIE. The survey information was used to inform a CECY written guide, "I Want to Work, I Know I Can" for teachers and families to help youth set personal goals with helpful resources for their path to employment (Sawyer, n.d.).

Establishing cross-system accountability and indicators of progress. Members focused on identifying relevant data and information to establish a baseline for employment of individuals with IDD across state systems and agencies. CECY created the Employment Data Dashboard, an online visual display of multi-agency data for easy access and tracking of state progress in CIE. Data is a powerful tool for advocacy, and members utilized the Data Dashboard to show the current low participation rate and employment of YYA with IDD. Going forward, the Data Dashboard will be used to track the effectiveness of the Blueprint implementation strategies and employment outcomes for individuals with IDD.

On a quarterly basis, individual and agency members reported actions that they had taken toward the implementation of policy and practice related to CIE. For example, "Drafted an MOU with the Franchise Tax Board for data sharing", "Hosted a Breakfast for Champions of top 14 local employers", and "Revised work services monitoring tool related to implementation of Employment First." Members were asked to categorize their strategies by the elements of

HPS and CECY's strategic actions. Strategies were discussed among members and used as indicators of progress across the various member agencies, organizations, etc. These practices were posted by members on a wall at meetings and shared in the form of a searchable directory.

Spreading what works. This refers to the capacity building and information sharing aspects of CECY's work used for families, professionals, providers, and YYA with IDD. Multiple methods for dissemination were used including presentations, webinars, websites, policy and informational briefs, resource guides, and weekly CECY E-news. CECY organized two 'employment' strands at the bi-annual CDE sponsored "*Bridge to the Future*" Transition Institute attended by over 1,000 transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors, families, and youth with IDD. Table 2 illustrates the range of activities and outcomes of the workgroups toward the accomplishment of CECY's goals and objectives.

6. Planning for sustainability

Serious consideration was given to ensure that the work of CECY was about more than a time limited 5-year grant period. Planning for sustainability was a part of the discussions from the start. The emphasis was on planning for how members would integrate CECY's work with that of their local or state agency, organization, or council. For example, a written agreement was established between CECY, DDS, and California State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) to continue the development and hosting of the Employment Data Dashboard on the SCDD website. The Tarjan Center will continue to support the public CECY website and its dissemination of products, including producing the weekly CECY E-News. The shared vision, cross agency understanding, deep familiarity with one another's work and priorities, and CECY's resources will continue to serve the state well as it moves into the implementation of the Blueprint. The Employment Development Division, under its DEI initiative, is providing support for the Tarjan Center to host CECY quarterly webinars through 2018.

7. Lessons learned

7.1. Federal investment drove system change

CECY identified a workable set of state and local strategies for policy and practice for the employment of youth with IDD including a visual display of data, outcome funding, successful practices, cross-agency professional development, and community engagement. CECY members made important incremental changes within their own work and that of their agencies/organizations. Even though CECY did not have the singular authority to make the wide scale and long-term systemic change that is now planned for in the Blueprint, the Blueprint workgroup leaders were highly engaged CECY members. Through CECY, they developed a comprehensive understanding of each other's work that they considered a catalyst for change and served as foundation to the Blueprint and its future implementation (D. Curtright, personal communication, September 21, 2016).

The CECY model was also adopted at the local level. CECY served as an example to other teams, workgroups, and consortia in the state. For example, a California Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Director and CECY member established a local transition group modelled after CECY.

7.2. Creating a neutral space for dialogue, collaboration, and change

The Tarjan Center, a university based, independent, non-governmental agency provided the administrative structure and program support for CECY. An expert and impartial facilitator was utilized for the quarterly meetings to create a welcoming environment and neutral space conducive to relationship building, discussing sensitive topics, and cultivating consensus. Meetings were not bound by strict governmental procedures or any single agency agenda; this allowed members to freely express and work through challenges such as competing priorities, conflicting values, issues, or concerns. For example, the use of subminimum wage and segregated services (sheltered work) was a contentious issue for some CECY members. Over a series of meetings, the differing viewpoints over the use of subminimum wage evolved into one about preparing for the implementation of the Employment First Policy and new federal laws and mandates prohibiting its use. Over the course of two years, the Regional Center of Orange County (RCOC), a CECY member, served as a case study for how local agencies institute an Employment First policy. RCOC no longer allows new entries into sheltered work and is now a model for the 20 other regional centers across the state.

Table 2
Examples of CECY actions and outcomes

Strategic Action	Examples of Activities	Outcomes
Strengthening Ties within CECY and its Partnering Agencies, Families and YYA with IDD	-Created a safe space for discussion, allowing for differences in values and positions to be surfaced and understood -Training to equalize knowledge across members -Provided opportunities for youth input -Established measurable goals, timelines, and outcomes -Shared successful strategies members implemented corresponding to the HPS -National experts provided subject matter expertise and -Celebrated success of agency/individual accomplishments	-Established a shared vision, common agenda -Vibrant and participatory consortium -Increased knowledge about member agencies, practices, state and federal trends and policies -Cross agency pairing of "LEADS" of CECY workgroups
Impacting Public Policies and Practices that Support CIE	-Written and spoken testimony on behalf of Employment First Policy and Self Determination -Written policy and informational briefs -Direct consultation and review of goals, objectives, and practices in Blueprint -Documentation of effective practices by LECTS, Regional Center of Orange County	-Employment First and Self Determination bills signed into law -Policy briefs on the DD system, transition, employment supports, and Employment First -California Works! 3 briefs on outcome-based funding structures; cross agency training and technical assistance; and local memorandum of understanding (MOU) -Toolkit for Braiding Services to Create Wrap Around Support -Regional Center of Orange County Case Studies -Blueprint
Raising Expectations for CIE and Expand Youth and Family Involvement	-Surveyed families and educators about perceived barriers to employment and resource needs -Engaged diverse community members in 7 local Community Conversations -Mini-grants -YAC members	-Parent Infographic -Teacher Infographic -Local communities identified existing assets and resources for CIE
Establishing Cross-System Accountability and Indicators of Progress	Reviewed existing data on CIE related outcomes from multiple agency sources Gathered examples of state and local agency and organizations' strategies used to advance CIE Identified need for demographic and earning data for individuals with IDD	-Data Dashboard (https://www.scdd.ca.gov/employment_data_dashboard/) -Searchable database of strategies for CIE corresponding to HPS and CECY strategic actions -SCDD data sharing legislation between the Franchise Tax Board and DDS

7.3. Partnerships are essential

Partnership is at the core of success of this project. CECY members built relationships that led to formal and informal partnerships and created meaningful alliances across agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders with a shared commitment for CIE. CECY members were individually empowered to serve as a resource to their own agencies/organizations and to one another; thereby gaining knowledge, confidence, important linkages and the capacity to avert potential misunderstandings and conflict. Often, members consulted with each other outside of CECY meetings, utilizing one another's expertise to advance CIE.

7.4. Local community members are part of the solution

CECY invited community members outside of governmental agencies to be part of the solution toward increasing employment for YYA with IDD. CECY's experience with the 7 Community Conversations showed that a broad constituency of community members from businesses, local and state government, service organizations, and schools and colleges cared about the issue. Community Conversation attendees were willing to contribute their skills and resources, as well as identify existing opportunities for employment in their local communities. Tapping into non-traditional local partnerships may facilitate networking opportunities and open new doors for employment.

7.5. Share and celebrate successes

Systems change takes a long time to achieve. Thus, it was important to celebrate and acknowledge incremental change and how each small or large accomplishment sustained forward momentum. It was also important to allow opportunities for individuals and agencies to share and get feedback on new developments, success stories, and/or changes underway.

8. Concluding remarks

The federal investment in California set the state on a trajectory toward long-term systemic change towards CIE. Through CECY's work, members developed a deep understanding of the policies, practices and administrative structures that inhibited and/or supported CIE – a process that could have taken the state a decade to achieve without federal investment. Not only did members develop knowledge and expertise, but also the capacity to put that knowledge into action. The time and investment made yielded strong progress toward laying the foundation for the larger transformation of the system yet to come through the implementation of the Blueprint. As this work within the state continues, it has the potential to build a responsive workforce system, influence, and reach significant scale in increasing the employment of YYA with IDD.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

None to report.

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Community Conversations to Increase Employment Opportunities for Young Adults With Developmental Disabilities in California

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Abstract

In 2013, California enacted an Employment First policy that prioritized competitive integrated employment as the first option and preferred outcome for adults with developmental disabilities. State agencies are working toward anchoring their policies and practices for successful local implementation of the Employment First policy. This study conducted community conversations to generate recommended strategies by local communities to increase the employment of people with disabilities. Drawing upon the World Café process, an assets-based approach, we engaged 431 employers, educators, disability agency staff, local and state government officials, individuals with disabilities, and other community members in seven geographically diverse areas across California to answer the question "What can we do to increase the number of people with disabilities working in our community?" In addition, responses to participant feedback and follow-up surveys offered additional insight into the perceived ability and readiness of communities to take action toward this goal. Analysis of the conversation notes and responses to the surveys underscored the importance of building partnerships with employers. This study highlights a useful approach for mobilizing communities' local assets, resources, and ideas that can be used to advance state policy for employment.

Keywords

employment, developmental disabilities, system(s) change, community conversations

Despite growing national attention to the employment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), employment rates have remained persistently low. Moreover, significant disparities in the employment rate for working-age people without disabilities (77.6%) versus people with any disability (34.6%) are even more pronounced for those with IDD (24.2%; Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2016). California's employment rate for people with IDD who were supported by the state's Developmental Disabilities agencies was lower than national figures, with just 12.1% receiving integrated employment services. The majority (76%) attended facility-based, nonwork programs (day or look-alike programs) rather than employment services (Department of Developmental Services, 2013–2014). Those who are working are typically underemployed and have limited hours at low wages (Boeltzig, Timmons, & Butterworth, 2008; Butterworth et al., 2016). Research has identified a host of reasons for the intractable low rates of employment of people with disabilities including negative attitudes (Burge, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Lysaght, 2007; Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006), low

expectations (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Shogren & Plotner, 2012), and disparate service systems (Federal Partners in Transition Workgroup, 2015).

In 2012, California was one of seven states selected for a Partnerships in Employment systems change project under the Administrations on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities' Projects of National Significance Program. Under this initiative, we established the California Employment Consortium for Youth and Young Adults with IDD (CECY), a collaboration of 45 representatives from 25 local and state agencies, associations, organizations, families, and self-advocates with responsibilities for the education, preparation, support,

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and employment of youth and young adults with IDD. The organizations and agencies represented included the State Departments of Education, Rehabilitation, Developmental Disabilities, and Employment Development, as well as families and youth self-advocates. The mission of the CECY was to stimulate policy change and build capacity in California state systems and local communities to support meaningful employment opportunities and increase the number of individuals with IDD in competitive integrated employment (CIE; Raynor, Hayward, & Rice, in press). For years, California had been working to develop an Employment First (EF) policy. Through cross-agency support from CECY and perseverance, California became 1 of 17 states with EF legislation after several attempts. This legislation affirms employment in integrated settings at or above minimum wage with commensurate benefits is a priority and preferred outcome for publicly funded services for individuals with IDD (Developmental Services: Employment First Policy, 2013; Hoff, 2016). California's EF policy states that "opportunities for integrated competitive employment will be given the highest priority for working age individuals with developmental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities" (Section 4869(a) (1)). The next steps were to develop concrete steps that could help the state and local communities begin the process of implementing policy into practice.

Shortly following the state's adoption of an EF policy, new developments in federal-level policy bolstered systems change efforts by raising expectations that all people with IDD can and should work in integrated settings when provided with the necessary transition, job preparation, and job supports. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid's new requirements for the funding of Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS; Advocacy Coalition, 2015) added protections to ensure that individuals receiving services will have full access to the community, including individual integrated employment. The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) required increased coordination between education, labor, and rehabilitation agencies to strengthen transition and preemployment transition services such as job exploration, work-based learning, and self-advocacy to improve transition of youth from school to postsecondary education or an employment outcome (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Collectively, these policies encourage the development of collaborative cross-system reform, coordination, and collaboration among the Departments of Developmental Services, Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, and other community partners.

California's EF legislation did not include any modifications to funding, changes to the service delivery system, training, or technical assistance to advance policy into practice. So how can communities move forward and start to implement the EF policy and related federal policies when there is little guidance on what it takes for this paradigm shift to be enacted? As Carter and Bumble (**IN PRESS**) state, "between individuals and systems lies the community." It is through local communities that real change in an individual's status can be observed. A fellow grantee, the TennesseeWorks Partnership, implemented "community conversations" to generate ideas and solutions to employment within local communities in their state as a way to tap into the assets and resources of local communities rather than solely relying on formal systems of services and supports (Carter et al., 2016; Carter, Blustein, Rowan, & Harvey, 2014). Previous studies have applied this approach to uncovering community solutions to the employment of adolescents with disabilities (Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2012), increasing summer employment opportunities for transition-age youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Dutta et al., 2016), engaging parent leaders in community change efforts (Carter, Swedeen, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, 2012), and generating ideas for the employment of youth with IDD (Carter et al., 2016). Based on the success of Tennessee's community conversations, we chose to adapt this approach to gain a better understanding of local resources and effective practices in California communities to expand integrated employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and to inform policy changes at the state level.

Community conversations offer a promising way to bring together various members of a community to brainstorm strategies and identify resources that can be used to increase the employment of people with disabilities. These conversations are predicated on the belief that each community member has expertise, the communities themselves have untapped resources and relationships, and lasting change comes from the commitment of its members (Swedeen, Cooney, Moss, & Carter, 2011). Community conversations draw upon the World Café model where community members come together for facilitated small- and large-group discussions centered around specific questions to generate solutions (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Community conversations can also be useful for community organizing and may be used as a strategy for systems change efforts (Carter et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore local resources and ideas for increasing employment opportunities for young adults with IDD. Seven community conversations were held to address our research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the local solutions and promising ideas generated through seven community conversations to increase employment of people with disabilities?

Research Question 2: What are participants' beliefs about their communities' readiness to take steps to employ more people with disabilities?

Method

Community Conversations

Selection of the communities. The community conversations were held in seven communities in Northern and Southern California, referred to as Communities A through G. All events took place in the second year of our 5-year statewide systems change grant that led to the formation of the CECY with IDD. The meetings were held in communities where CECY had recognized and awarded a small grant to document and expand promising practices for transitioning youth and young adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities into employment. Four of the programs were situated within secondary education and one within postsecondary education. The two remaining programs were employment service providers. Each of the programs achieved higher employment rates for young adults than what was being achieved at the state or national level for individuals with IDD. These programs served as our first point of contact and the organizer for their local community event. Although events drew from the surrounding areas, community conversations themselves were held in two rural areas (A and C), four large cities (B, D, E, G), and one small city (F), with populations ranged from 7,291 to 1.3 million (National Center on Education Statistics, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Local planning teams (LPTs). Representatives from the local community, building from the identified programs described above, along with a CECY staff member, served on LPTs. The LPTs varied in size from 8 to 11 people, with two members serving as the primary leaders. The LPTs had representation from a cross section of community members including representation from schools, disability organizations, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, employers, and government staff. The role of the LPTs was to provide local perspectives on the community conversation, coordinate event logistics and registration, encourage attendance through personal and professional connections, and participate as a table host during the conversation. The LPTs were also responsible for selecting a title for the event, crafting the invitation, and selecting the opening speakers. The minimum commitment of the LPT members was to participate on two webinar teleconference trainings and one postconversation debrief teleconference.

CECY staff provided training and guidance to support all pre-event planning and logistics. The planning process started 5 to 7 months prior to each conversation. Three initial calls with the LPT leads were held to plan for the conversations. Each organization invited members from its community to participate on its LPT. The trainings consisted of background information on the significance of the issue of disability and employment, the process for hosting a community conversation, and a detailed review of the conversation materials and table host responsibilities. In addition, the CECY staff member held monthly check-in calls with each LPT until the month before the community conversation, and then weekly calls and emails with the two primary leaders until the day of the event.

Participant recruitment. Publicity and outreach for the event began 6 weeks before each community conversation. The intent was to invite a broad cross section of community members to attend the event. A CECY staff member provided guidance to the LPTs regarding potential categories of participants as well as the specific suggestion to outreach to employers and young adults with disabilities. The LPTs were encouraged to outreach throughout their counties to community members within and outside the disability community such as the Chamber of Commerce, independent living centers, faith-based organizations, rotary clubs, youth organizations, employers, educators, arts organizations, nonprofits, parents, service providers, and other nonprofit organizations. All seven LPTs created a "Save the Date" flyer, made personal phone calls, and sent emails to ensure invitees would attend. Four of the communities created a press release that they distributed to their local newspapers and newsletters. One community created a public service announcement and distributed flyers at a local popular diner. Six of the communities utilized an online event-planning site (i.e., SplashThat) for registrants to RSVP, as well as telephone and email.

Six of the seven community conversations had almost all of their participants register prior to the event. In one community (A), there was only one registrant prior to the event. The LPT for that community insisted that "people in their community do not RSVP" and indeed there were 51 in attendance. At the other six events, five to 10 people registered on-site the day of the conversation. An invitation to each of the seven community conversations was also announced in the weekly CECY online newsletter. In addition, a community conversation page was created on the CECY website that listed all of the events with a link to the online registration.

Participants

A total of 431 community members attended one of the seven events ($M = 62$; range = 41–85 per conversation). Participants identified themselves as representing employers ($n = 83$, 19.3%), school or education ($n = 80$, 18.6%), disability service providers ($n = 76$, 17.6%), individuals with disabilities ($n = 64$, 14.8%), community nonprofit representatives ($n = 54$, 12.5%), government representatives ($n = 39$, 9.0%), family members of someone with a disability ($n = 38$, 8.8%), faith-based community representatives ($n = 13$, 3.0%), or others ($n = 10$, 2.3%, for example, consultant, advocate). Participants were asked to identify "all roles" that best described them; therefore, totals may exceed total number of participants per site.

Table 1. Percentage of Participant Roles Represented by Community Conversation.

| Participant role | Community conversation site | | | | | | | Total |
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Employer/business leader	28.6	12.8	40.0	12.7	12.4	17.0	6.4	83
Faith community member	4.4	—	4.0	5.5	1.1	2.1	2.6	13
Educator	7.7	17.0	22.0	29.1	6.7	34.0	20.5	80
Government official or staff	13.2	8.5	6.0	11.0	11.2	2.1	3.8	39
Community/nonprofit leader or staff	11.0	12.8	6.0	11.0	21.3	8.5	7.7	54
Disability agency/provider	16.5	14.9	4.0	9.1	29.2	4.3	24.4	76
Person with a disability	11.0	25.5	10.0	9.1	10.1	12.8	21.8	64
Family member of individual with disability	6.6	6.4	8.0	12.7	5.6	6.4	12.8	38
Other	1.1	2.1	—	—	2.2	12.8	—	10
Total roles represented	91	47	50	55	89	47	78	457

Note. Participants could identify more than one role so totals may exceed total number of participants.

Representation of these roles varied by site. Table 1 displays participant role by community conversation site. Two sites had a large employer turn out (Community A = 26, Community C = 20). Other sites had a high attendance of representatives from school and education. For example, attendees in communities D, F, and G predominantly identified themselves as affiliated with the school/education field (16 at each site). Representation from disability agencies most frequently occurred at conversations in communities A (15), E (26), and G (19). In general, there were few family members of someone with a disability in attendance (range = 3–7). However, there was strong representation of individuals with disabilities, particularly in communities B (12) and G (17). Two sites also had notable representation from government officials in attendance (Community A = 12, Community E = 10).

Community conversation procedures. Participants were instructed to sit at a table with people they did not know, generally 5 to 10 people at each table. Ten individuals were assigned to be table hosts with two backup hosts for each conversation. Identified table hosts met 1.5 hr prior to the conversation start time to be briefed on their responsibilities and tips for facilitating the discussion. Table hosts were responsible for encouraging participation from everyone, keeping participants focused on brainstorming solutions rather than becoming stuck on what is not working, assisting participants to quickly move to another table at the end of each round, handing out the participant feedback survey and follow-up cards, and documenting the top three ideas from their table for each round. A staff timekeeper monitored the time to keep to the schedule.

Each community conversation began with a welcome from invited speakers from the community. The speakers set the tone for the conversations that followed. There were two to four speakers per event: three events with employers, four with government officials (i.e., mayor, state assembly, state senate, and local official), two with students with disabilities, two with college administrators, and one with a community advocate. The content of their remarks varied; youth spoke about how much they valued their work, an employer described her success finding the "right person for the right job," and a government official talked about existing local employment regulations that assist people with disabilities access public sector jobs. Six of the seven communities showed a short film featuring youth and young adults with IDD successfully working in the community and attesting to their value as an employee. Following introductory remarks, a CECY staff member explained the purpose of the conversation, described how it works, and posed the two questions participants would discuss during the three rounds:

1. In [name of community], what can we do to increase the number of people with disabilities working in our community? (Rounds 1 and 2).
2. How might we work more effectively together to make a real difference in employing people with disabilities in [name of community]? (Round 3).

Each round consisted of a small-group discussion with those around the table and lasted 15 min. The tables were covered with butcher-block paper and participants were encouraged to write down their ideas as a visual aid to remember their recommendations. At the end of each round, all participants were asked to move to another table and sit down next to people who they did not know. After the third round, the large-group discussion or "harvest" occurred for 25 min. During the large-group harvest, participants were

invited to share the most promising ideas they heard at their tables about what they could do to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities in their community. Through the harvest, participants could see for themselves the emerging patterns and similarities across the table discussions. A notetaker and two scribes documented the ideas shared during the harvest on large poster sheets in front of the room. The event ended with concluding remarks and distribution of a participant feedback survey and follow-up cards. Attendees who returned their participant feedback survey were eligible to enter a raffle for a US$25 gift card awarded before the event concluded.

Data Sources

Several data sources were collected during and post the community conversations. For purposes of this article, we analyzed the notes from the community conversations and responses from the two surveys (i.e., the participant feedback survey, follow-up survey).

Harvest notes. A staff member wrote down each of the recommendations made during the large-group discussion, when participants identified the top ideas they had heard at the different tables. The harvest yielded a total of 211 individual ideas (21–44 per event, $M = 30.1$).

Participant feedback survey. Participants were asked to complete a survey about their experience attending the community conversation at the end of the event. Seven items from the participant feedback survey were adapted from Carter et al. (2016). Participants were asked their level of agreement with eight statements using a 4-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). An option to mark "I don't know" was included. Four of the statements were related to the community conversation experience and four statements pertained to the perceived readiness of their community to employ people with disabilities (see Table 4 for items). In addition, participants were asked to complete the following statements: "I came to the community conversation because . . ." and "The idea I am most excited about is: _____." Furthermore, participants were asked what would have made the event better. We received completed surveys from 308 of the 431 attendees (71.5%).

Follow-up survey. Approximately 6 weeks after each event, we contacted attendees for whom we had contact information and invited them to complete an online survey addressing the continued barriers and action steps. The follow-up survey contained both items modified from Carter et al. (2016) as well as newly created items. Using the same 4-point scale described previously, we asked attendees the extent to which they agreed with two statements: "Attending this event was a good investment of my time" and "My

community will take action to employ more people with disabilities." Furthermore, we added a yes/no question asking if they had told anyone about their community conversation experience. If they said yes, they were asked to indicate who that person was (i.e., employer, coworker/colleague, friend, family, neighbor, service organization member, elected official, and/or other). We also asked whether they had since taken any action or advocated for employing people with disabilities (i.e., yes, no, I don't know). When the answer was yes, we asked for a brief explanation of what they had done. Finally, we included two open-ended statements: "In [community name], the two biggest barriers to the people with disabilities getting jobs are: ___" and "In the next six months, the 2 to 3 most important things our community can do to increase the employment of people with disabilities are: _____". These surveys were completed by 158 (39.3%) attendees.

Data Analysis

This study used a mixed-methods approach to addressing our research questions, using both qualitative data from the harvest notes and open–ended questions as well as quantitative data from the surveys. In this way, we were able to capture diverse information related to the implementation of the community conversations and grounded in the communities' point of view about employment. We utilized the constant comparative method to analyze the ideas and solutions generated at each of the community conversations and open-ended questions on the surveys (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We utilized surveys to measure the value of the experience to the participants and their assessment of community readiness to act on the recommendations made.

Coding. To address the research questions, we created a codebook from a comprehensive list of the words and phrases documented within and across the community conversations that represented the ideas or solutions recommended to increase employment for people with disabilities. We utilized a grounded approach to the coding process, with codes emerging from an initial review of the harvest notes and responses about ideas most excited. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Each idea or recommendation was entered into a spreadsheet and considered a unit of text for coding and the analyses. If the unit of text represented multiple recommendations, it was separated into distinct entries. We had a total of 483 units of text available, grouped by community conversation. Ultimately, we were able to code 400 units of text; the remaining 83 units of text were either a one-word response, lacked a verb, or an uninterpretable action.

Themes were systematically revised throughout the coding process (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The first author developed an initial list of codes that were used for

each line of words and phrases (units of text) from one of the community conversations. All authors met to discuss each line of coding, review any discrepancies, and reach a consensus when differences were found. This was followed by a second round of coding of a portion of each of the six other community conversations and again doing a line-by-line review that led to additional revisions to the codebook. We refined our coding scheme based on our discussions of the data and provided additional details or intent. Some of the codes delineated specific stakeholder responsibility, such as employers: *strengthen provider and employer referral relationship*, or parents: *involve parents in transition to work*, while other codes were not specified and could be carried out by one or more community members such as *educate and inform the community*.

All of the conversations were coded in their entirety a second time. We completed coding in pairs, with each member of the pair independently identifying a theme from the community conversation and then meeting to review and reach agreement on any of the items coded differently. Each pair had one member who had attended the community conversation who could provide important insights and context for the interpretation, thus allowing previously uninterpretable text to be coded. The development of themes evolved as the research team discussed the codes and their meaning, what the codes exemplified, the ways they related to one another, and their goal. These discussions formed the initial basis for the construction of the themes. Using the recommended techniques described by Guest et al. (2012), we specifically looked for patterns and commonalities by making constant comparisons of similarities and differences between the codes within and across the community conversations, as well as the absence or frequency of recommended actions. For example, *provide career preparation experience, start transition from school to work early, involve parents in identifying community resources and employers, develop self-determination skills*, and *prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology*, were clustered together under the theme, *Prepare Youth and Adults with Disabilities for Work*. The final codebook contained 20 distinct codes for the recommended actions and solutions to increase the employment of people with disabilities that fell within five broad themes. Table 2 presents a description of all codes and themes. We transformed our final codes and themes into descriptive statistics for comparison within and across communities.

We used descriptive statistics (percentages and mean ratings) to summarize responses to the participant feedback survey and follow-up survey. The three open-ended questions on the follow-up survey were categorized and used to supplement other information pertaining to the perceived capacity of their community and their own actions taken since the conversation. As previously described, one item from the participant feedback survey was coded through the constant comparative method to further inform ideas to increase employment of individuals with disabilities.

Results

The purpose of the seven community conversations was to engage representatives from diverse sectors of the community to identify existing resources and strategies to improve the employment opportunities and outcomes for people with disabilities. A total of 400 strategies were organized into 20 categories (groupings of strategies with similar ideas, practices, or recommendations) and five themes (groupings of categories that reflected a similar goal). See Table 2. Although the five themes were common to all seven communities, two themes encompassed 60.3% of all strategies: "Building Partnerships with Employers" and "Building Awareness and Share Resources." Table 3 displays the frequency of each theme and category mentioned across the community conversations.

Theme 1: Building Partnerships With Employers

Across all the community conversations, the most prominent theme addressed strategies to support employer-driven efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities (frequency or number of times the strategy was recommended $n = 134$, 33.5% of all categories of strategies). The most frequently recommended strategies were *creating or joining coalitions, associations, and networks* that would bring together a cross section of civic, business, and disability leaders to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Participants proposed the *creation of a local government liaison* who would serve as a conduit to community employers and develop employment opportunities in the public sector. Another recommended strategy was to foster *employer to employer outreach* where model employers would reach out to others and in doing so share their positive hiring and business practices for employing people with disabilities. For example, they could host business-to-business discussions about mentorships or internships, exchange stories of how they work with employees with disabilities, and discuss the benefits of hiring to their business. Another recommendation was to *strengthen the referral relationship between employers and providers* that would lead to successful job matches and placements.

Theme 2: Build Awareness and Share Resources

The second most discussed theme was to *build awareness and share resources* for education and training, resources, and information to people with disabilities, families, current and prospective employers and community members ($n = 107$, 27% of all strategies). These strategies focused on communicating and sharing successful employer-driven

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Categories With Definitions.

Theme/category	Description
Build partnerships with and among employers	Strategies to support employer-driven efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities
Increase employer to employer outreach	Develop opportunities for employers to share the benefits of their business and their successful employment practices
Strengthen employer and provider referral relationships	Develop ongoing local partnerships that lead to successful job matches and placements
Create or join coalitions, associations, and networks	Bring together a cross section of civic, business, and disability leadership to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities
Create a local government liaison for employers	Establish a dedicated city or county position to outreach, educate, and support career preparation opportunities and employment by private and public employers
Build awareness and share resources	Strategies for providing education, training, resources, and information to people with disabilities, families, current and prospective employers, and other community members
Educate and inform the community	Utilize a variety of formats (i.e., online, presentations, tours, tool kits) to create greater awareness, dispel myths, share best practices, and provide practical resources on job supports, reasonable accommodations, and hiring
Showcase what works	Draw attention through the media to stories of success about employees with disabilities, successful programs, and business practices
Show appreciation and recognize exemplary employers	Support and recognize the achievements of employers for their recruiting, employing, and retaining employees with disabilities
Prepare youth and adults with disabilities for work	Strategies for educators and parents to prepare people with disabilities for the transition to work through self-determination, career development, and networking in their community
Provide career preparation experience	Expand work-based learning opportunities through internships, apprenticeships, and mentoring
Start transition from school to work early	Expose K–12 and postsecondary students to career pathways and work experience
Involve parents in identifying community resources and employers	Utilize parents' community networks to educate and outreach to community members and potential employers who may assist them in securing employment for their child
Develop self-determination skills	Equip youth and adults with the skills, attitudes, and opportunities to play an active role in their own career development
Prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology	Educate and train on the use of media to job search and demonstrate their employment skills
Streamline application and hiring practices	Strategies that strengthen relationships and communication with employers about existing jobs and remove barriers to getting hired by people with disabilities
Centralize job listings	Create an accessible centralized database or job board with easy access for people with disabilities, providers, and employers
Create a good job match	Improve the communication and process for identifying skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities and the requirements of existing jobs
Individualize the hiring process	Implement policies and practices that accommodate or allow for an alternative application process to improve success in being hired
Connect with personnel responsible for hiring	Strengthen and grow business relationships with employers and management responsible for hiring including human resources and hiring managers
Prioritize employment of people with disabilities	Strategies to develop and change services for employment and incentivize employers to hire
Strengthen the service delivery system	Change policies, organize services differently, and enhance funding to properly prepare and support people with disabilities to transition into successful and permanent employment
Use or develop incentives to hire	Develop new or use current tax and other business incentives to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities
Improve transportation access	Increase access and availability of transportation to jobs
Modernize skills of service providers	Educate the service provider community on the use of social media and technology in the job search and hiring process

Table 3. Occurrence (%) of Strategic Themes and Subcategories Across All Sites.

Theme/category	Site						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Building partnerships with employers	36.9	36.9	28.8	33.3	31.1	21.2	28.0
Increase employer to employer outreach	13.8	6.5	5.1	2.4	14.8	0.0	8.0
Strengthen provider and employer referral relationships	6.2	0.0	6.8	4.8	4.9	5.8	4.0
Create or join coalitions, associations, and networks	13.8	30.4	15.3	26.2	9.8	13.5	13.3
Create a local government liaison for employers	3.1	0.0	1.7	0.0	1.6	1.9	2.7
Building awareness and share resources	21.5	26.1	20.3	23.8	8.2	53.8	34.7
Educate and inform the community	13.8	15.2	13.6	19.0	6.6	44.2	20.0
Showcase what works	4.6	8.7	5.1	4.8	1.6	9.6	2.7
Show appreciation and recognize exemplary employers	3.1	2.2	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0
Prepare youth and adults with disabilities for work	15.4	19.6	10.2	28.6	13.1	5.8	21.3
Provide career preparation experience	9.2	6.5	3.4	2.4	4.9	0.0	4.0
Start transition from school to work early	3.1	2.2	1.7	16.7	1.6	1.9	2.7
Involve parents in transition to work	1.5	0.0	0.0	9.5	0.0	0.0	5.3
Develop self-determination skills	0.0	10.9	3.4	0.0	3.3	3.8	2.7
Prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology	1.5	0.0	1.7	0.0	3.3	0.0	6.7
Streamline application and hiring process	9.2	8.7	37.3	2.4	18.0	13.5	14.7
Centralize job listings	0.0	4.3	11.9	0.0	3.3	9.6	1.3
Create a good job match	1.5	4.3	6.8	0.0	0.0	1.9	6.7
Individualize hiring process	0.0	0.0	10.2	0.0	8.2	0.0	1.3
Connect with personnel responsible for hiring	7.7	0.0	8.5	2.4	6.6	1.9	5.3
Prioritize employment of people with disabilities	16.9	8.7	3.4	11.9	11.5	5.8	1.3
Strengthen service delivery system	12.3	4.3	3.4	4.8	3.3	0.0	0.0
Use or develop incentives to hire	3.1	4.3	0.0	2.4	4.9	3.8	1.3
Improve transportation access	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	0.0	1.9	0.0
Modernize skills of service providers	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.3	0.0	0.0
Total number of coded strategies	65	46	59	42	61	52	75

efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities. The idea to *educate and inform* about employment and the unique needs of people with disabilities were the second most often mentioned strategy across all conversations. Potential recipients of information included Chambers of Commerce, hiring managers, students with and without disabilities, employers, and organizations. Examples of information dissemination suggested by participants included presentations, training sessions, informal conversations, tool kits, and websites. In regard to content, the recommendations primarily focused on the need for disability awareness in general and more specifically about the value of people with disabilities as an untapped workforce for businesses. Participants also saw the benefits of harnessing the power and influence of all forms of media to *showcase what works*, such as generating radio spots and public service announcements (PSAs). Participants mentioned the importance of *recognizing and showing appreciation to exemplary employers* by taking the "time to acknowledge business(es) that are employing people with disabilities." Taken together, these recommended strategies create greater exposure and

awareness of the unique employment needs of people with disabilities, dispel myths, and offer successful examples and recognition to employers already hiring people with disabilities, which has the potential to encourage other employers to do so.

Theme 3: Prepare Youth and Young Adults With Disabilities for Work

The third most prominent theme addressed specific strategies for educators and parents to *prepare youth and young adults for the transition to work* ($n = 64$, 16% of all strategies). Participants mentioned the importance of exposing youth with disabilities to careers and work as young as possible. They recommended *starting transition from school to work early* so there is a more natural flow and realistic expectation for work. Strategies included transition fairs to impart information to families, inclusive education and work experiences, and early exposure to community employers. Early preparation should also include the *development of self-determination skills*, including building self-esteem

Table 4. Percentage (Frequency) of Attendees' Perception of the Value of Participation and Community Readiness by Site.

Participation/readiness responses	Site						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Value of participation[a]							
The meeting was a good use of my time.	92.7 (51)	93.8 (30)	100.0 (38)	100.0 (32)	100.0 (53)	97.6 (40)	100.0 (54)
I learned something new about my community.	92.6 (50)	84.4 (27)	97.4 (37)	96.9 (31)	96.1 (49)	95.0 (38)	100.0 (55)
People came up with good ideas.	94.4 (51)	93.8 (30)	100.0 (37)	96.9 (31)	100.0 (53)	97.6 (40)	94.5 (52)
I know what I can do next to increase employment for people with disabilities.	87.3 (48)	90.6 (29)	84.2 (32)	93.5 (29)	88.2 (45)	82.5 (33)	90.7 (49)
Views on participation[b]							
Attending this event was a good investment of my time.	85.7 (24)	91.3 (21)	100.0 (19)	100.0 (10)	100.0 (21)	94.7 (18)	86.8 (33)
Community readiness[a]							
People in our community are open to employing people with disabilities.	81.8 (45)	68.8 (22)	86.8 (33)	71.0 (22)	86.5 (45)	87.5 (35)	70.4 (38)
Our community has the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs.	83.6 (46)	81.3 (26)	92.1 (35)	96.9 (31)	94.3 (50)	92.7 (38)	88.7 (47)
There are strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families in my community.	61.8 (34)	62.5 (20)	73.7 (28)	43.8 (14)	62.3 (33)	70.0 (28)	60.0 (33)
We need to take action on employing people with disabilities in our community.	92.7 (51)	84.4 (27)	100.0 (38)	100.0 (31)	98.1 (51)	97.6 (40)	96.3 (52)
Community readiness[b]							
My community will take action to employ more people with disabilities.	77.8 (21)	68.2 (15)	83.3 (15)	60.0 (6)	90.0 (18)	84.2 (16)	77.8 (28)

[a]Participant survey. [b]Follow-up survey.

and self-confidence. Recommended strategies focused on the ways in which youth and young adults could acquire *career preparation experience* including paid and unpaid internships, apprenticeships, job fairs, and tours of job sites. For example, one participant recommended leveraging resources at a local community college to reestablish a credit-bearing course for student internships in private business. "This gives good training and often, unpaid internships lead to employment." These experiences should be explicitly linked to potential career paths. Some participants suggested strategies for engaging parents in the transition process to help identify community resources and potential employers. Other suggestions included *involving parent leaders or creating a parent network* to identify community resources and outreach to potential employers and other community members to broaden opportunities for employment.

Theme 4: Streamline Application and Hiring Practices

The fourth theme focused on specific strategies to help people with disabilities find jobs more easily and simplify the application and hiring process ($n = 62$, 15.5% of all strategies). The recommended ideas included actions that could be taken by employers, by others assisting the person with a disability to get work, or both. One example included creating an accessible centralized database for persons with disabilities, employers, and providers. Participants recommended strategies that included *individualizing the hiring process* and for providers to have direct *access to key personnel responsible for hiring*. In addition, some participants recommended strategies (e.g., contact and communication) that would foster greater collaboration between providers and employers to *create a good job match* between the requisite skills for a position and the abilities of the applicant with a disability.

Theme 5: Prioritize Employment of People With Disabilities

The fifth theme addressed strategies to *prioritize the employment of people with disabilities* ($n = 62$, 15.5% of all strategies) through changes in policy and practices. Participants emphasized more "out of the box" and "innovative" approaches are needed to work with employers,

perspective employers, and community members. It was also recommended that employers learn about existing *tax and other business incentives* to hire people with disabilities and that additional incentives be developed as a motivation for employers. Other recommended strategies aimed to *strengthen the service delivery system* by increasing funding to expand the availability of job coaches and improve *transportation access* to jobs. Participants mentioned the need to *modernize the skill set of service providers* to better connect people with disabilities to employers. For example, service providers need to update their skills in technology to effectively assist their clients to look for, network, and apply for a job. An employer participant offered to help local providers "bring their job search skills into the 21st century," including the use of social media (e.g., LinkedIn).

Value of Participation

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the community conversation was a good use of their time (range = 92.7%−100%, *M* = 97.7%). This sentiment was reaffirmed on the follow-up survey (range = 85.7%−100%, *M* = 94.1%; see Table 4). Likewise, participants agreed that people came up with good ideas (range = 93.8%−100%, *M* = 96.7%). Participants, for the most part, also learned something new about their community (range = 84.4%−100%, *M* = 94.6%). Furthermore, most participants responded that they knew what to do next to increase employment for people with disabilities (range = 82.5%−93.5%, *M* = 88.1%).

Community Readiness

In general, participants seemed to feel that their community needed to take action on employing people with disabilities in their community (range = 84.4%−100%, *M* = 95.6%). Although the majority agreed their community had the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs (range = 81.3%−96.9%, *M* = 89.9%), far fewer felt people in their community were open to employing people with disabilities (range = 68.8%−85.8%, *M* = 79.0%). There was more variation and less agreement by respondents in feeling that there were strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families in their community (range = 43.8%−73.7%, *M* = 62.0%). Respondents also varied in their belief that their community would take action to employ more people with disabilities as reported on the follow-up survey (range = 60.0%−90.0%, *M* = 77.3%).

Participants responding to the follow-up survey identified several activities their community should focus on within the next 6 months to increase the employment of people with disabilities. As one participant stated, "The most important things that can be done to increase the employment of people with disabilities is to just increase awareness. Have employers speak out and let others know how beneficial it is to hire individuals with disabilities." In

addition, it is important to acknowledge the employers who have hired people with disabilities, share success stories both from the employee with disability and employer perspective, and utilize various media outlets to share these success stories.

Discussion

The first inklings of change are occurring since the passage of California's EF Policy. Between 2013 and 2015 there was an increase in the percentage of individuals served in integrated employment services from 12.5% to 13.1% and annual earnings increased from US$6,490 to US$6,758 (California Department of Developmental Services, 2013–2014, 2014–2015). Given that there had been minimal, if any, change in employment for individuals with IDD, this suggests that policies such as the EF policy are important in supporting change. However, it is the implementation of policy at the local level that creates change in the lives of individuals. Therefore, it is the communities that are tasked with identifying the solutions and strategies that work toward a particular goal. In line with previous research by Carter et al. (2014; Carter et al., 2016), we found that community conversations offer insights into existing solutions and available resources by a diverse group of community members toward addressing the intractable problem of employment for people with disabilities. Recommendations from our community conversations pointed to the potential influencers for change and specific strategies that can improve employment outcomes.

In policy and practice, there is growing recognition of the need to engage employers for successful employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. The primary recommendation emanating from the community conversations was focused on ways to build partnerships with employers. The specific strategies indicated employers would respond best to messages from their peers, in essence hearing the experiences of other employers in working with individuals with disabilities. It is a fellow employer who can speak to what is important to the employer, who is getting a good employee, and who is satisfying their "bottom line" (National Governors Association, 2013). There is also a need for service providers to develop relationships with employers so that they are aware of employer expectations and can better provide any supports an individual with IDD needs to perform his or her job. These recommendations are consistent with current literature, policies (WIOA), and practices calling for stronger alignment between the demand side perspective (Luecking, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The WIOA specifically stipulates multiple and new levels of engagement for employers within the workforce system including advisory boards, mock interviews, and internships.

While additional themes focused on ways services provider and families could better prepare and support the

employment of people with disabilities, the employer perspective continued to be an important one to include. For example, the second theme about building awareness was speaking to the need for employers to be exposed to positive stories about working with an individual with IDD and building awareness of abilities of individuals with disabilities. Employer participants offered to help prepare individuals with IDD and other disabilities for jobs by conducting mock interviews, training providers on recent technology, and speaking to other similar companies about their experiences. Conversely, other participants were able to contribute feedback on what would make the application and hiring process more accessible to individuals with disabilities and raise awareness about barriers to that process. For example, online applications can present difficulties for individuals with IDD. Research by the Partnership and Employment and Accessible Technology (n.d.) echoes this point, finding that 46% of the individuals with disabilities surveyed rated their experience applying online as "difficult to impossible."

Findings from the participant feedback survey and follow-up survey indicate varying levels of optimism about moving communities toward hiring more people with disabilities. For the most part, participants recognized the need for their community to take action on employing people with disabilities and believed that their community had the ability (resources) to do so. However, there appears to be a disconnect between beliefs about its importance and community capacity with the perceived openness by community members to hire individuals with disabilities. For example, Community D had the highest percentage of respondents who felt their community had the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs. Conversely, respondents from the same community had the lowest percentage who believed their community would take action to employ more people with disabilities. This feeling may be related to a lack of agreement that strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families existed in their community. Building partnerships with employers was recognized in the conversations as a central recommendation to increasing employment of people with disabilities. These findings suggest that partnership building is not simply a possible strategy, but an essential strategy in creating changes at the local level.

Policy change has been found to be more effective when state-level leadership is attentive to state and local context, reinforces critical values, provides capacity building activities, and supports promising practices (Furney, Hasazi, & Destefano, 1997). In furtherance of the EF Policy, the California Department of Education (CDE), Rehabilitation (DOR), and Developmental Services (DDS) in collaboration with Disability Rights California entered into an agreement and recently crafted the California CIE Blueprint ("Blueprint"). It provides a framework for collaboration and coordination across the agencies to support the achievement of CIE. The Blueprint for the first time sets benchmarks and expectations for CIE, delineates agency roles and responsibilities, and proposes pathways for individuals with IDD to achieve CIE. Recognizing the importance of local communities in improving CIE outcomes for individuals with IDD, the Blueprint calls for the development of Local Partnership Agreements. The Blueprint sets the expectation that the local equivalent of the state agencies representing education, rehabilitation, and developmental services will be a key strategy used by local communities to increase CIE outcomes for individuals with IDD and will serve as models for the state (CDE, DOR, & DDS, 2017a). The Local Partnership Agreements template reinforces the importance of employer engagement voiced in our community conversations by advising the inclusion of business partners in the agreement (CDE, DOR, & DDS, 2017b). Potential linkages can increase CIE by expanding outreach and engagement with business partners, increasing awareness of the business community of the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities, alerting service providers and consumers of job opportunities, and providing training to other businesses.

Study Limitations

Caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study. The event is intentionally time limited, fast-paced, and solution driven. The structure of the conversation does not lend itself to asking clarifying questions that might provide a more detailed understanding of an idea or action. Future research would lend itself to audio or video recording for the community conversation to capture the richness of the conversations and ideas generated. As mentioned above, although community conversations strive to bring together a diverse cross section representing the community as a whole, not all roles are equally represented. Future community conversation research may systematically look at how LPTs and conversation participants may or may not affect the types of strategies recommended. The pool of strategies from the harvest was limited to our notetakers documentation as our table hosts' notes were incomplete or illegible. Future work might also consider an additional follow-up survey 4 to 6 months after the event to ascertain whether the actions generated were being acted upon by community members (Trainor et al., 2012). Related, future community conversations may further explore this gap between what it takes to get from belief to action for their particular question.

Conclusion

Recent state and federal policies reflect a growing expectation for competitive, integrated employment outcomes. To achieve success, state agencies are working toward

anchoring their policies and practices to the overall objective of employment and local implementation. Communities are challenged to develop, modify, and align their practices with this policy objective. Community conversations offer a useful approach to bring together diverse stakeholders and community members to identify existing resources and possible solutions to large-scale issues such as employment. A strength of this approach is that it allowed us access to employers, a group central to employment and historically a difficult group for service provider agencies to engage. Through the community conversations, employers, service providers, families, and individuals with disabilities were able to learn from each other. It also provided an opportunity to initiate potential partnerships. In addition to specific strategies recommended, a central theme of partnership building with employers emerged. The CDE, DDS, and DOR echo these findings by advocating Local Partnership Agreements to align with the state's EF policy. It is the community itself that must develop strategies that will work, given its unique resources and services. The success of state policy will be realized and indicated through the success of local communities to implement it.

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