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Successes of Youth with Disabilities Transitioning from School to Employment

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Thank you, Collaboration to Promote Self-Determination and the National Council on Disability, for this opportunity to talk about the successful demonstration program that Wisconsin was privileged to participate in to engage youth with disabilities and their families and bring them into the workforce.

Wisconsin PROMISE Background

The purpose of Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) is to implement model demonstration projects that promote positive outcomes for youth ages 14 to 16 who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and their families. PROMISE is intended to improve the provision and coordination of services and supports for child SSI recipients and their families, and to enable them to achieve improved outcomes, including:

1. Graduating from high school ready for college and a career
2. Completing postsecondary education and job training
3. Obtaining competitive employment in an integrated setting
4. Increasing youth and family financial self-sufficiency

In October 2013, Wisconsin PROMISE, a five-year research demonstration grant, was awarded to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD), in partnership with Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction, Department of Health Services, and Department of Children and Families. Wisconsin PROMISE is an interagency demonstration grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA), U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Wisconsin PROMISE enrollment and services started in April 2014 and continues through September 30, 2018, with additional time in 2019 for data evaluation and sustainability planning.

This program came at a time when Wisconsin employers are grappling with a tight labor force from an unemployment rate below 3 percent and are looking to engage workforce populations that may have been overlooked in the past. Wisconsin has a proud tradition of engaging and supporting people with disabilities moving into the workforce through innovative state programs, and PROMISE has allowed Wisconsin to focus even more on engaging a community, and their families, that traditionally have been left on the sidelines.

Prior to PROMISE and implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), only 13 percent of youth ages 19 to 23 receiving SSI payments had have received services from a state vocational rehabilitation agency, and only 22 percent were employed, compared with 69 percent for all adults ages 20 to 24 (Rangarajan et. al, 2009).

Wisconsin PROMISE enrolled 2,024 youth ages 14 to 16 receiving SSI and their families. Half (1,006) were randomly assigned services as usual (receiving a list of resources, including information on how

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to apply for DVR) and half (1,018) received PROMISE Services. Youth and families in the PROMISE group were automatically enrolled in DWD's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and quickly connected to a dedicated PROMISE DVR Counselor to develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

Each PROMISE youth's IPE automatically included all PROMISE evidence-based transition services, which were required by the grant and identified through the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth's Guideposts for Success (<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts>). Though some of these required services are available via DVR's usual services, Wisconsin PROMISE ensured that all the required services were included on each PROMISE youth's IPE.

Required services included work incentives benefits counseling, financial coaching, on-the-job social skills training, family and self-advocacy training, employment services, and health promotion. The PROMISE DVR Counselor also identified and developed resource teams, which included, but were not limited to, schools, long term care providers, and mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies, to ensure wrap around services to support youth and family members in reaching their education and employment goals.

Family members connected to the PROMISE student also received services through their own DVR case (if they had a disability and were eligible for DVR services), or through a PROMISE family service plan as part of the youth's DVR case. Family members were eligible to receive any services available to the youth that would support the family member's employment goals.

Wisconsin PROMISE DVR Counselors had relatively smaller caseloads compared to other DVR staff, averaging 50 to 70 youth per caseload to allow time for the additional services, wrap around service coordination, and family service plans.

Demographics of PROMISE Youth

At enrollment, Wisconsin PROMISE youth's self-reported disabilities included 34 percent mental health or behavioral, 30 percent developmental or intellectual, and 25 percent other (e.g., learning, speech, ADHD, etc.), with a smaller percentage with other disabilities reported such as sensory, physical, and long-term illness.

Other notable demographics include: 49 percent of youth were African American, 36 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic; 67 percent male; 66 percent living in a single parent/guardian household; 85 percent reported good overall health; 70 percent reported an annual household income at or below \$25,000; 84 percent had an Individualized Education Plan at enrollment; and 77 percent were attending a traditional high school or middle school. All youth were receiving SSI and Medicaid at the time of enrollment.

In addition, 60 percent of families reported someone in the household receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), 67 percent reported receiving Food Share, 22 percent reported other household members receiving SSI, 12 percent reported housing assistance, and 4 percent were receiving Wisconsin Works (W2) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

KEY FINDINGS

Work Experience

One key goal of Wisconsin PROMISE was to connect all PROMISE youth to at least one, preferably two, paid work experiences prior to high school graduation. Wisconsin PROMISE focused on paid work experiences while in high school because that experience is the best predictor of employment as an adult (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011; Test & Cease-Cook, 2012). Youth who received Wisconsin PROMISE Services were more likely to have a DVR case, engage in employment services, and have paid work than were youth randomly assigned to services as usual. As of May 2018, 100 percent of PROMISE youth in the treatment group had a DVR case (with 80 percent still open), compared to 32 percent youth in the control group (with 51 percent still open). DVR Services were correlated with higher employment rates (Kaya et al., 2016; Rumrill et al., 2017), and youth receiving PROMISE services were more likely to be employed. As of June 2018, 63 percent of PROMISE treatment youth had reported UI wages since enrollment, compared to 53 percent in the control group.

Work Incentives Benefits Counseling and Financial Planning

According to a recent Government Accountability Office report (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-485>), work incentives, such as the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), are the primary method SSA uses to encourage transition-age youth to work, but only 1.5 percent of transition-age youth use SEIE. Between 2012 and 2015, even when youth had earnings, SEIE was applied less than half of the time. PROMISE Work Incentive Benefit Specialists coached youth and family members on how they can increase their overall earnings through SSI work incentives and still receive needed services and supports, including healthcare.

Benefit consults for the treatment group included the whole family because family member earnings could impact the youth's benefits. Youth who met with a Work Incentives Benefit Specialist had twice as many jobs, and youth who met with a financial coach had twice the total weekly earnings.

PROMISE youth and family members also had the opportunity improve their financial self-sufficiency through Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), where they received incentives for saving money toward purchasing items to help them achieve their education and employment goals. PROMISE youth and family members who saved \$250 received a \$1,000 savings match paid by the program to be used toward the purchase of an item such as technology, transportation, or training to help them achieve those goals. PROMISE youth with an IDA were more likely to be employed (85 percent) compared to individuals who without an IDA (44 percent).

Family Supports

Supporting the PROMISE families helped improve youth's access to transition resources and improved expectations and outcomes. PROMISE families received Family Advocacy training that focused on employment possibilities for youth with disabilities and provided PROMISE families information on how to navigate transition services. Of families who completed the Wisconsin PROMISE Family Advocacy training, 90 percent agreed the training elevated their expectations of what is possible for their child after high school. Additionally, training families about how to access needed resources and services, and sharing employment possibilities for youth with disabilities, was correlated with higher youth employment rates.

Youth and Family Empowerment

PROMISE youth and their families are valuable members of their communities with interests, skills, and abilities employers are seeking. PROMISE DVR Counselors used motivational interviewing, trauma informed care, and rapid engagement to support youth and family members to develop their own goals and plans. The goal was to empower PROMISE youth and families by teaching them how to problem-solve, navigate the existing system and supports, and connect them to jobs where their potential could be fully realized. After Family Advocacy training, 84 percent of PROMISE family members reported knowing about transition supports for youth, 71 percent reported using more and different resources, and 50 percent reported increases in regular job opportunities for PROMISE youth. After self-advocacy training, 84 percent of PROMISE youth reported that their abilities help them handle difficult events, and 97 percent of PROMISE youth reported they know what they need, what they like, and where they excel.

Interagency Collaboration

Youth with a teacher or another school personnel identified on their resource team had better employment rates. Employment outcomes for youth were better when the various services and supports were integrated and worked together to support PROMISE youth and their family members.

Youth Training

PROMISE Services were individualized and provided one-on-one. Group sessions were also provided as an opportunity for peer interactions and practice that had a positive impact on youth learning. Youth trainings were more successful when PROMISE trainers:

1. Held trainings where youth already were
2. Made multiple contacts to increase attendance
3. Gathered basic information about each youth before the training
4. Maintained an instructor-to-student ratio at 6 to 10 youth per instructor
5. Removed reading and language barriers
6. Used active teaching strategies and multiple hands-on learning activities
7. Added variety
8. Ensured every activity was inclusive (of all youth no matter their abilities)
9. Broke down difficult concepts into small chunks
10. Related information to real life examples
11. Scheduled regular breaks
12. Established cell phone expectations

LESSONS LEARNED AND WIOA IMPLEMENTATION APPLICATIONS

Wisconsin PROMISE services influenced the implementation of Wisconsin DVR's Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) program as part of WIOA, particularly in the areas of job-related social skills training, self-advocacy, and Work Incentive Benefits Consultation. One of the core services provided by Wisconsin PROMISE is work-related social skills, or *soft skills*, training.

When implementing soft skills training, we found that learning and practicing these skills while working was important to ensure that youth were able to apply them from training to a work setting. Wisconsin PROMISE created the technical specifications DVR used and later adopted, modified, and trained providers to use for a soft skills curriculum available to all DVR consumers. The curriculum used is called Skills to Pay the Bills, developed by the Office of Disability Employment Policy in the Department of Labor (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>). Additionally, Wisconsin DVR incorporated soft skills training into the Student Work Based Learning program, which provides students on-the-job training and opportunities to practice their soft skills in the workplace.

Wisconsin DVR also worked with local Independent Living Centers to develop a self-advocacy curriculum based on lessons learned from the Self-Advocacy service provided to PROMISE youth. Specifically, Wisconsin DVR made sure self-advocacy was provided in person, instead of through online modules, to help ensure better engagement.

Based on PROMISE lessons learned, Wisconsin DVR also added benefits consultation as an available service, while continuing to offer benefits analysis as needed. Prior to Wisconsin PROMISE, DVR could fund a benefits analysis as needed, but for many youth and families, a benefit analysis was too much information at once. To address this, Wisconsin PROMISE provided a modified service, called a *benefits consultation*, where the Work Incentive Benefit Specialist met with the PROMISE youth and families on an ongoing basis to talk about their current questions and concerns and provide information as needed, rather than providing the information all at once. This service format was so successful that it is now available to regular DVR consumers.

Overall, Wisconsin PROMISE significantly increased the number of jobs youth and families obtained, overall household wages, and connection to post-high school education and training. These outcomes are informing the implementation of and improvements to public programs in Wisconsin.

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