

Twelve Ideas to Promote Employment for Youth with Disabilities: An Introduction to the SSI Youth Solutions Project

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Policymakers are increasingly interested in identifying promising strategies for supporting youth with disabilities as they transition into adulthood, particularly youth receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Youth receiving SSI are of special interest because they typically have poor outcomes as young adults compared with youth without disabilities (Deshpande 2016; Levere 2019). Furthermore, SSI participation rates among youth have grown substantially over the past decades in comparison to other cash transfer programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Wittenburg et al. 2015; Tambornino et al. 2015). To address the challenges these youth face in transitioning from school to work, the federal government provides a wide range of supports to youth with disabilities, including youth receiving SSI (Honeycutt and Livermore 2018). It has also encouraged collaborations at the federal, state, and local levels, for example through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA).

As an array of supports have been proposed to aid youth receiving SSI with their transitions, the federal government is working to systematically identify particularly promising approaches. In 2017, the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) funded the SSI Youth Formative Research Project. This project collected and synthesized the available evidence for interventions to support youth receiving SSI as they transition to adulthood. Because the evidentiary support for existing interventions is often limited and varies by context and target population, an important outcome from the project was a set of criteria for policymakers to identify and select across an array of potential interventions. The framework considered how potential interventions could meet policy objectives, fit within the existing landscape of supports, and have a meaningful impact on transition outcomes while remaining cost-effective (Honeycutt et al. 2018).

To generate testable ideas for improving outcomes among youth receiving SSI, ODEP initiated the SSI Youth Solutions project in 2019. The project gathered proposed ideas from 48 subject matter experts for testable program and policy solutions. ODEP and its federal partners reviewed the ideas and selected 12 to create fully developed papers—a process that included input from independent peer reviewers and staff from ODEP and its federal partners.

This document briefly introduces the papers developed under the SSI Youth Solutions project. First, we provide background information on the SSI programs for children and adults, with a special focus on the transition between the two programs. Next, we describe the transition landscape, discussing key existing laws and programs that support youth transition. We then outline some of the common challenges experienced by youth receiving SSI and their families in navigating the transition landscape. Finally, we provide a brief overview of each of the 12 papers, highlighting key features and the challenges they attempt to address.

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A. Background on the child and adult SSI programs

SSI is a cash transfer program overseen by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that supports aged, blind, and disabled persons (including children) who have limited income. In 2019, 1.1 million children received SSI benefits, two-thirds of whom were male, and about 400,000 of whom were between ages 13 and 17—the age range during which transition planning and support becomes critical. Over 80 percent of youth in this age group qualify for SSI because of an intellectual disability or psychiatric disorder (SSA 2020a).

To qualify for SSI, both children and adults must meet strict medical, income, and asset criteria, though the specific criteria differ for the two age groups. Importantly, eligibility for adults depends on the ability to work, whereas eligibility for children depends on having a functional impairment. Thus, upon turning 18, youth receiving SSI are reevaluated for eligibility against the adult criteria, a process referred to as the age-18 redetermination. After all appeals, approximately two-thirds of people who receive SSI payments as children continue to be eligible for SSI at age 18 (Bailey and Hemmeter 2015). The income and asset criteria also differ for children and adults; some parental income and resources count for determining a child's eligibility, but they do not count for adults age 18 and older. New applications to SSI are more than twice as common for young adults ages 18 to 21 than for transition-age youth ages 13 to 17 (SSA 2020a).

The SSI program includes provisions to encourage the labor force participation of adults with disabilities. Two of the most relevant for young adults are Section 301 waivers and the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE). Under Section 301 waivers, SSI payments can be continued after individuals have been determined ineligible at age 18 if they are receiving training under an individualized employment plan, vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, or similar support program (SSA 2020b). The SEIE allows people under age 22 who are regularly attending school to exclude some earnings from income in the calculation of SSI benefits (SSA 2020b).

Youth receiving SSI who continue receiving SSI as adults could face different challenges than people who enter SSI as adults. These groups differ in their qualifying disability as well as demographic and asset characteristics (Hemmeter 2015). Therefore, efforts to promote employment among adults who retain SSI eligibility through the transition to adulthood must be tailored to the needs of that population.

B. Transition landscape

A number of laws and governmental programs support youth transition. Two of the most important laws are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and WIOA. Several federal agencies also operate programs targeting youth with disabilities.

Administered by the U.S. Department of Education, IDEA requires that eligible children receive a free and appropriate public education, including preschool, primary, and secondary education. Education services must be individualized to a student's needs, as reflected in individualized education programs (IEPs). The IDEA governs special education and related services, such as physical and occupational therapy as well as adaptive equipment and other supports. It also authorizes grants to states, local agencies, and organizations to support offering services to eligible youth. IDEA requires schools to begin transition planning by the time special education students reach age 16. Eligibility for services under IDEA is broader than SSI eligibility because IDEA both covers a larger set of impairments and does not include income and asset restrictions. In the 2018–2019 school year, 7.1 million students ages 3 to 21 received services under IDEA (NCES 2020), compared with about 1.1 million SSI recipients under age

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18 (SSA 2020a). Despite the overlap, about 25 percent of youth receiving SSI do not participate in special education (Wittenburg and Loprest 2007).

Enacted in 2014, WIOA altered the landscape for how workforce partners offer services to youth with disabilities. In particular, WIOA intended for workforce partners to increase collaboration and alignment across their programs serving youth (DOL 2017a, 2017b). State VR agencies, for example, increased their focus on youth with disabilities in several ways: offering pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities, spending at least 15 percent of their federal allotment on transition services, offering services to groups of students, and coordinating their services with secondary schools (DOL 2019). As a result, these agencies have increased the proportion of participants served who are younger than age 25; in program year 2019, half of all participants served were younger than 25 (RSA 2021).

Other federal and state programs also support youth transition (see Table 1). These programs operate under the authority of several federal agencies with diverse purposes and potential difficulties sharing data. The system is thus fragmented and often challenging to navigate, resulting in an increasing number of youth at risk of reaching adulthood without the preparation and supports that could help them achieve their employment and education goals.

Table 1. Programs supporting transition-age youth with disabilities

Program	Description	Administered by	Funded by
SSI	Means-tested income support program for youth with qualifying medical conditions or functional limitations.	Federal	SSA
Special education	Free education for children with disabilities; IEPs specify needed services and supports for successful transition from secondary school.	Local	ED
State VR agencies	Federal-state program providing services intended to help people with disabilities work, including therapeutic services, counseling, job training, and job placement assistance.	State	ED
Medicaid/Children's Health Insurance Program	Health care coverage for low-income individuals who meet state eligibility requirements; jointly funded by federal and state governments.	State	HHS
Centers for Independent Living	Community-based programs that provide skills training, peer counseling, employment, and other services to promote independent living.	Local	HHS
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Nutrition benefits to supplement food budgets of low-income families.	Federal	USDA
Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF)	Time-limited cash transfer program to low-income families with children.	State	HHS
State workforce development agencies	Programs focused on job training and employment, including Job Corps, Pre-Apprenticeship, and Apprenticeships.	State	DOL
Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts	Tax-advantaged account that can be used to save for disability-related expenses, including employment training and support.	Federal	IRS

DOL = Department of Labor; ED = Department of Education; HHS = Department of Health and Human Services; IEP = individualized education program; IRS = Internal Revenue Service; SSA = Social Security Administration; SSI = Supplemental Security Income; USDA = United States Department of Agriculture; VR = vocational rehabilitation.

C. Challenges that youth with disabilities and their families face during the transition to adulthood

Despite the broad array of federal, state, and local programs targeting transition, youth with disabilities face a number of challenges in accessing and using available services (Fraker et al. 2015; GAO 2012, 2016).

- **Lack of information and awareness.** Although federal programs often conduct outreach, many youth and families might be unaware of available transition support services. The wide range of services can be especially difficult to parse for youth out of school, who no longer have secondary school staff connecting them to school and community resources.
- **Limited or delayed access to services.** Program resources are, at times, limited, causing agencies to prioritize youth with the most severe disabilities or adopt wait lists. In some locations, such as rural areas, certain services may simply not exist. In these situations, youth might have limited or delayed access to federal transition programs, resulting in a failure to receive services when they would be most impactful.
- **Uncoordinated service system.** The various programs operate relatively independently from one another, making it difficult for agencies to coordinate services and for youth to access the broad array of services. Coordinating the services across multiple programs would likely enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of services. In addition, programs differ in their eligibility rules and incentives, adding to potential confusion and resulting in variable access to services. In some cases, participation in one program affects eligibility for another. Responsibility for understanding and coordinating services across programs falls primarily on the youth being served and their families.
- **Inadequate preparation for postsecondary education and employment.** Youth with disabilities engage in paid and unpaid work experiences during high school at lower rates than youth without disabilities, despite federal programs promoting work experiences for youth with disabilities (OSERS 2020). Poor preparation in high school heightens the challenge of transitioning into competitive integrated employment or postsecondary education after high school. Consistent evidence shows that work experiences in high school are correlated with postsecondary employment (Mazzotti et al. 2021).
- **Limited use of evidence-based practices.** While many interventions targeting youth with disabilities have limited causal evidence of effectiveness, a growing body of evidence points to several best practices leading to better transition outcomes. Nevertheless, use of evidence-based practices in many programs is inconsistent. Agencies may not offer their staff training on evidence-based practices, and, even when they do, staff may struggle to integrate best practices into their day-to-day work with youth and families.
- **Low expectations.** An important predictor of postsecondary outcomes is expectations (Carter et al. 2012). Due to persistent misconceptions about work opportunities for youth and young adults with disabilities, some youth and families have low expectations and thus feel disempowered and less inclined to pursue supports targeting work or postsecondary education.

D. SSI Youth Solutions papers

In this section, we introduce each of the 12 papers developed under the SSI Youth Solutions project, all of which can be accessed through the US Department of Labor's website (<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/individuals/youth/ssi-youth>). The papers build on the transition landscape to address some of the challenges described above to improve the employment and other outcomes of youth with disabilities. We group the papers by topic (case management and service coordination, disability employment curriculum, education and training, and federal program policy) to identify their common features and distinguishing characteristics.

1. Case management and service coordination

Four papers attempt to address the lack of coordination in the transition services landscape by making it easier to provide families with information and share information between service providers.

- **[The Family Empowerment Model: Improving Employment for Youth Receiving Supplemental Security Income \(Catherine Anderson, Ellie Hartman, and D.J. Ralston\)](#)**. The proposed Family Empowerment Model involves a three-stage intervention led by Family Empowerment Specialists (FESs). In the first stage, the FES would conduct targeted multi-modal outreach to youth receiving SSI and their families. Once youth and families are enrolled, the FES would engage with the youth and family in the second stage to increase expectations concerning education and employment. They would also offer assistance in navigating existing transition services and supports. FESs are expected to earn clients' trust through a combination of person-centered, culturally-relevant, and trauma-informed interviewing approaches. FESs would have experience (either personal or through a family member) navigating the local disability transition landscape, lending them further credibility. In the third stage, the FES would connect the youth to an Integrated Resource Team composed of existing transition and employment service providers. Representatives from each program that has been identified as supporting the youth's individual employment goals would participate in the team, enabling communication and collaboration in supporting transition for the youth through age 24.
- **[Secondary Systems Linkages and Transition Tracker: A Systems Approach to Enhance Post-School Employment Outcomes \(Jade Ann Gingerich and Kelli Crane\)](#)**. This paper describes a digital tool (Linkage Tool), which is designed to enable data sharing across agencies that currently collect information on their own services but are unable to observe services provided by other transition providers. The tool would enable school staff and other providers to comprehensively track service delivery for enrolled students with disabilities. After students (or their legal guardians) give consent for data to be shared, participating providers would regularly upload key data points into the tool. Important information that could be shared includes referrals to partner agencies, eligibility for and receipt of services, milestone events such as graduation or employment, and outcomes one year after exiting high school. Over time, additional data could be added as new partners engage with the tool.
- **[Policy Considerations for Implementing Youth and Family Case Management Strategies Across Systems \(Andrew Karhan and Thomas Golden\)](#)**. This paper calls for Youth and Family Systems Navigators (YFSN) to provide comprehensive case management to help youth with disabilities meet their employment goals and to address the lack of basic family needs or other barriers that prevent full engagement with transition services. As a first step, the YFSN would assess the youth's (and their family's) specific situation, such as concerns with housing or transportation, and discuss the youth's employment goals. By engaging and assisting with barriers outside of transition, the YFSN is

expected to build trust with the youth and family that enables successful engagement with transition planning. After the youth and family meet their basic needs, the YFSN would work with them to secure increased access to employment and educational services targeting youth in transition. The YFSN would stay engaged with the youth (and family) through age 24 as a resource to respond to crises or challenges that could interrupt the youth's progress toward their goals.

- [**Improving Youth SSI Recipients' Employment Outcomes Through an Integrated Treatment Team Intervention in a Healthcare Setting \(Aryn Taylor, Teresa Nguyen, and Melanie Honsbruch\)**](#). The authors propose adding case managers to health care provider teams serving youth receiving SSI at multidisciplinary clinics that specialize in children with special health needs. When a youth turns 14, the case manager would join their team of health care providers to provide ongoing support, referrals, and assistance related to improving employment outcomes. Being a part of this team provides the case manager the same high level of trust youth and families typically have with their medical providers. The case manager would engage with the youth at least once per month until age 18 and advocate within the medical team to integrate employment into treatment goals.

2. Disability employment awareness and empowerment curricula

Two papers propose tailored education programs to target misconceptions about working as a person with disability. One of them addresses the lack of knowledge around available employment resources, while the other involves workplace readiness.

- [**Family Employment Awareness Training \(FEAT\): A Research-Based Program for Promoting High Expectations for Employment and Knowledge of Resources \(Judith Gross, Grace Francis, and Stephanie Gage\)**](#). This paper promotes the national adoption of an employment awareness curriculum for youth with disabilities, their families, and professionals in transition support roles. Topics include (1) expectations around work and testimonials from individuals in the community who have achieved competitive, integrated employment; (2) resources available to support competitive employment; and (3) goal setting and employment planning. The curriculum can be adapted to each state, bringing together key state-level partners (for example, staff from VR, special education, and Workforce Development Centers) under the leadership of a local parent advocacy organization. Under a train-the-trainer model, a state licenses the curriculum and receives training and support from the FEAT consulting team. The FEAT curriculum has already been implemented in five states.
- [**Employment Empowerment: A Foundational Intervention for Youth with Disabilities to Build Employment Skills \(Paul Hippolitus\)**](#). This paper encourages widespread adoption of an empowerment curriculum designed around three goals to improve the employment readiness of youth with disabilities. These goals include (1) building employment self-confidence, (2) teaching fundamental professional workplace skills, and (3) promoting longer-term strategies for building a career. The curriculum is available for free in multiple formats that can be used in different environments and can be taught by non-specialist trainers with a positive disability perspective and relevant competitive work experience. The author suggests a federal cross-agency effort to promote employment empowerment through widespread adoption of the curriculum (in its current form or adapted for other settings and service groups) as a means to shift the broader narrative around work and disability, especially for youth.

3. Education and training

Five papers consider education programs that provide or expand access to postsecondary education. The papers span diverse strategies for increasing participation in postsecondary education, from training for special educators to direct provision of career and technical education (CTE) to cash support.

- [**Demonstrating the Effectiveness of Short-Term Career and Technical Training in a Residential Setting for Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities \(Kevin Hollenbeck\)**](#). The proposed intervention encourages CTE for youth ages 14 to 24 in residential settings, building on two existing programs. For those under 18, the focus of the program would be skill and interest assessment. Participating students spend 5 to 10 days in a residential program, during which time they develop expectations about their postsecondary training trajectory. For youth over 18, the program would be more intensive—two to four 10-week residential courses during which participants receive CTE focused on a career pathway. Participants would select from a variety of fields, such as automotive technology, culinary arts, and pharmacy services. The residential model is a key feature of the program, enabling participants to develop close relationships with peers and providing opportunities to develop independent living skills.
- [**Progressive Education: Early Intervention Strategy to Improve Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth with Disabilities \(Tara Howe, Christine McCarthy, James Smith, and Richard Tulikangas\)**](#). Progressive education offers graduated, age-appropriate exposure to postsecondary exploration and engagement activities starting from age 14 and continuing through age 24. The program would be conducted as part of VR services for youth with disabilities, shifting the default expectation for VR service delivery to include exploration of postsecondary education and training options under the principle that all youth with disabilities can benefit from such activities. Specific options would be student-driven and based on the students' interests and needs. Services could include campus tours, informational interviews with college staff, audited college classes, dual high school and college enrollment, and—for older youth or high school graduates—CTE program enrollment and apprenticeships. For successful implementation, VR counselors will work closely with special educators and the state college system to coordinate services. All students will also be linked with a benefits counselor who can identify relevant benefit programs and work incentives.
- [**Building an Apprenticeship Infrastructure for SSI Youth \(Daniel Kuehn\)**](#). This paper envisions a grant-funded apprenticeship program for youth with disabilities ages 16 to 22. Under this program, intermediaries (such as secondary schools, VR agencies, or advocacy organizations) would support youth receiving SSI by conducting a range of activities. These activities would include coordinating apprenticeship partners (such as employers and workforce development agencies), managing or funding support services, providing support to participating employers, and supporting youth in navigating their applicable benefit programs. The grant program would fund each apprenticeship program for four or five years, during which time the grantees would develop sustainability plans. Grantees might operate regionally, statewide, or even nationally to enroll enough participants. In addition to providing youth with on-the-job training and work experience, apprenticeship intermediaries could encourage participating youth to take advantage of SSI provisions intended to smooth benefits through the transition, such as the SEIE and Section 301 waivers.
- [**Career and Technical Education for Students with Emotional Disturbance \(Colleen McKay and Marsha Ellison\)**](#). This paper calls for broad adoption of the Translating Evidence to Support Transitions in Career and Technical Education program (TEST-CTE), a guide for special educators working with students who have emotional disturbance. Among other activities, the guide specifies

that students should set specific and achievable career goals and participate in a progression of CTE courses along their selected career pathway in a high-demand industry. TEST-CTE could satisfy federally-mandated transition planning requirements for secondary schools. Implementation is simple, requiring little more than training and coaching educators and transition professionals in the guide's recommended practices.

- [Prototype Transition to Economic Self-Sufficiency \(TESS\) Scholarships for Youth and Young Adults with Significant Disabilities \(David Stapleton, James Smith, and Tara Howe\)](#). By providing reliable income support for an extended period after high school to youth with disabilities, Transition to Economic Self-Sufficiency (TESS) Scholarships could address the work disincentives facing youth as they begin to develop their careers in early adulthood. The authors envision a private-public partnership that uses existing state programs (such as VR) but relies on private funding. Youth would enroll upon high school completion or shortly thereafter and receive cash support (approximately \$10,000 per year) through age 30 as long as the individual actively pursues a career. The scholarships would be disbursed in the form of contributions to a tax-advantaged savings account that would not affect SSI or Medicaid eligibility. Funds are intended for expenditures related to pursuing a career and to offset earnings-related reductions in benefits. Each participant would also receive professional career coaching, including development of and assistance with carrying out an individual career plan. The coach would coordinate the activities of others involved in executing the youth's plan and monitor progress toward economic independence and compliance with the scholarship terms. The private sector partner, which could be a nonprofit organization, would be responsible for fundraising and administering the scholarship program. A TESS Scholarship program is under development in Vermont.

4. Federal program policy

One paper argues for a new regulation that allows SSA to delay using substantial gainful activity as an eligibility criterion for adult SSI until age 22.

- [Delaying Application of SSI's Substantial Gainful Activity Criterion from Age 18 to 22 \(Sheryl Larson and Judy Geyer\)](#). Delaying application of SSI's adult disability criteria to age 22 and adopting a modified version of the child eligibility criteria for young adults ages 18 to 21 could improve transition outcomes by providing financial assistance and access to support services during this important developmental period. Until age 22, adult income and asset standards would apply, but the child disability criteria would be the relevant benchmark for determining medical eligibility. Affected populations include youth transitioning from the child SSI program as well as young adults first applying for SSI benefits in early adulthood. The Developmental Disabilities Act and Amendments of 2000 offers precedent for extending the developmental period through age 21. Many of the key transitions that occur between ages 18 and 22 (such as establishing a household separate from parents, transitioning to adult medical care, and exploring career options) could be less challenging with continuous SSI income support and access to services such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Continued SSI benefits could provide access to Ticket to Work and state VR programs at precisely the time when this population is most likely to engage with employment, thus promoting longer-term adult outcomes.

E. Conclusion

Youth with disabilities, and youth receiving SSI in particular, continue to face challenges with successful transitions from school to adulthood. The 12 papers that are part of the SSI Youth Solutions project seek to address many of these challenges in innovative ways, either by extending existing programs or by offering new programs and opportunities. A companion report, “Considerations for the Papers Developed for the SSI Youth Solutions Project,” provides additional context and considerations for the 12 ideas described in the papers, and a forthcoming report will address evaluation issues. DOL’s website for the project offers additional resources, including recordings of webinar discussions with the paper authors and policymakers on how to improve the employment outcomes of youth receiving SSI.

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