

SWTCIE Practice Brief

Outreach Strategies to Engage Potential Participants and Employers

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About the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment National

Evaluation. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) awarded Mathematica a five-year contract to evaluate the federal fiscal year 2022 Disability Innovation Fund-Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE; Assistance Listing Number 84.421D) grant program. As part of the Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) program, RSA awarded grants to 14 state vocational rehabilitation agencies to implement Innovative Model Demonstration projects. These projects aim to decrease subminimum wage employment and increase competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities currently employed in or contemplating subminimum wage employment. To achieve these goals, the projects will create innovative models for dissemination and replication that (1) identify strategies to address barriers to accessing competitive integrated employment, (2) provide integrated services that support competitive employment, (3) support participants' integration into the community through competitive employment, (4) identify and coordinate wraparound services for participants who obtain competitive employment, (5) develop and disseminate evidence-based practices, and (6) provide readily accessible and transformative business models that entities with section 14(c) certificates can adopt.





Introduction

This practice brief explores how some Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) staff are promoting their projects to potential participants and employers. The findings come from interviews with staff from four SWTCIE projects (Connecticut, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas) held in May and June 2024. We selected these projects for a variety of reasons, including their innovative practices and different stages of implementing their projects. Lessons learned from these interviews could help other projects design and implement aspects of their projects. These findings describe early outreach efforts and are not representative of all projects.

Findings

The SWTCIE projects in Connecticut, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas had varied marketing and outreach plans. The table of promising outreach and marketing practices (Exhibit 1) summarizes some of the overarching strategies the projects are using to connect with people and employers. The best practices that Connecticut, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas use include meeting people where they are and proactively addressing their concerns, engaging a wide network in their communities, consulting external resources such as communications firms to shape their branding, and promoting success stories.

Exhibit 1. Promising practices for outreach to potential participants and employers

Promising practice	Examples
 <p>Meet people where they are</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand and address participant and family questions and concerns through conversations, peer mentoring, and frequently-asked-questions documents. Take a progressive approach to employment by helping participants strengthen their skill sets and fill gaps as needed to be as employable and successful as possible. Emphasize to employers that providing accommodations is not necessarily expensive.
 <p>Engage communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convene a wide network of interested parties to shape decisions, such as through advisory groups or panels. Educate messengers in the community on projects, including school staff and case managers. Attend local events as opportunities to conduct outreach, such as community barbeques and school open houses.
 <p>Use external resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use existing relationships, including those with other state agencies, to market the project and reach potential participants and employers. Consider consulting with a communications firm to enhance branding and ensure consistency across marketing materials.
 <p>Promote successes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share success stories of people who have effectively transitioned to competitive integrated employment through videos, information sessions, or flyers. Involve peer and family mentors who have found success in competitive integrated employment in the outreach process.

Overview of outreach and marketing approaches by project

Here, we summarize each project’s approach before discussing findings by topic.

Spotlight on Connecticut



The Connecticut Pathways to Integrated Employment (CT/PIE) project developed its marketing and outreach plans with an outreach and messaging workgroup. A range of project collaborators met regularly to help develop marketing and outreach strategy and materials, including people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) and family members. To recruit youth, the project sends letters to eligible students and attends high school events facilitated through its partnership with the Connecticut Department of Education. In addition, school staff describe the project and refer interested students engaged in pre-employment transition services. This referral process leverages the strong relationship between school staff and students and their families to highlight the benefits of competitive integrated employment (CIE) and CT/PIE. The project also engages with 14(c) certificate holders through in-person events and referrals to promote CT/PIE to adults currently working in subminimum wage employment. The workforce outreach team meets with employers to discuss the benefits of participating in CT/PIE and answers employers’ questions about the project.

Spotlight on Minnesota



Though still in the planning stages for participant and employer outreach, the GoMN! project is drawing on prior advisory input and engagement efforts to inform its outreach approach to participants. The project’s navigator will identify and train messengers to inform the community about GoMN! Developing messengers is especially important during the pilot period because 14(c) providers in the pilot area shut down in anticipation of potential policy changes ending subminimum wage employment. The navigator will meet with waiver case managers, Centers for Independent Living staff, and school staff to talk about the project. These messengers will help identify and recruit potential participants for the project. The project’s employment specialist will leverage existing infrastructure and relationships to conduct market research before contacting potential employers. The Minnesota State Transportation Center of Excellence trained the business engagement specialist and navigator on the state’s transportation industry and will help engage employers.

Spotlight on North Carolina



The North Carolina SPARK project worked with a marketing firm and an advisory group to develop its branding and marketing materials. Name recognition and community buy-in were important goals of the planning process. The project selected three 14(c) certificate holders in rural, urban, and suburban areas to test outreach strategies during the pilot. The largest 14(c) provider will no longer offer subminimum wage employment, so the project can focus on internal outreach to current workers in that area. Project navigators paired with smaller 14(c) providers conduct more external outreach to transition-age youth and adults in the community who may not have been successful in subminimum wage employment or with vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Some project navigators attend community events to connect with potential participants. The project navigators also conduct focused outreach by liaising with schools, consulting a waitlist for Medicaid services, and meeting with case managers from the state's mental health department who serve overlapping populations. Mentors from the advisory group and project leadership support pilot sites as the sites implement and refine their outreach strategies. The project director reached out to certain industry employers in the pilot areas with the goal of establishing memorandums of understanding to offer a range of project-related opportunities, such as internships to CIE placements.

Spotlight on Texas



The Texas Beacons of Excellence SWTCIE project created its marketing and outreach plan during design team meetings in collaboration with a variety of project partners. It hosts frequent informational sessions in person to introduce the project to people with I/DD and their families working at or on the waitlist of 14(c) certificate holders. Attendees are given green, yellow, and red flashcards to hold up to indicate their familiarity with topics. This approach promotes interaction at the sessions and provides more opportunities to answer attendee questions. The project reaches out to youth considering subminimum wage employment and their families at one school district, communicating through the established school channels and informational sessions. The project distributes a flyer, a frequently-asked-questions document, and a consent-to-contact form to gather contact information and permission to reach out. Embedded project staff at 14(c) certificate holders connect with interested adults and families in meetings to discuss the project in more detail and address their concerns about transitioning from subminimum wage employment to CIE. The project engages with employers that have connections to the state's VR agency network. Employment specialists offer a series of trainings to employers on disability and employment and provide outreach materials with information about the benefits of providing CIE opportunities to people with I/DD.



Marketing the project

SWTCIE projects use a variety of strategies to market their project to potential participants and employers. The project staff selected the names of their projects to be easy to remember and resonate with a variety of interested parties. The Minnesota project chose GoMN! as its name to reflect its focus on connecting participants with the transportation industry. North Carolina selected SPARK to “spark” interest in employment and “spark” knowledge. Some projects consulted with a communications firm to develop their branding and ensure consistency across marketing materials. The Connecticut project selected branding colors that match the state's VR agency to build trust and make the project easier to recognize. To build enthusiasm, some projects will create videos to share success stories of those who successfully transitioned to CIE.

The SWTCIE projects collaborated with advisory groups or partners to gather input on branding and marketing materials. For example, the Connecticut project selected a logo that resonated with people with I/DD participating in the work group and incorporated the language self-advocates used to describe their motivation to work into outreach materials. Multiple project leaders emphasized that marketing materials should be accessible, visually engaging, and written in plain language. Some projects have materials available in English and Spanish.



“We had a great couple self-advocates...on that group who really talked about why they worked and what they got out of work. We were able to build that language into those marketing materials. I just thought that was a really productive and successful way to go about that.”

—SWTCIE project leader



Outreach to potential participants

The SWTCIE projects have different strategies to enroll potential youth and adult participants. Project staff have, however, consistently emphasized the importance of proactively addressing families’ concerns during outreach. Texas project staff, for example, cover common concerns during informational sessions, such as transportation, safety, and impact on benefits. North Carolina project staff use several strategies to address concerns through messaging and their staffing model for outreach. For example, project staff emphasize transportation reimbursement to potential participants. Benefits counselors meet with people before they enroll in North Carolina’s project to discuss CIE’s effects on benefits. Job coaches are also available to meet with families and talk about project supports. Peer mentors have outreach time built into their responsibilities because the North Carolina project has seen the value in having individuals and families engage with those who have been successful with CIE.

Outreach to youth

The SWTCIE projects collaborate closely with schools to identify and share information with students. School staff typically have trusted relationships with students and families and mechanisms in place to disseminate information. For example, the Connecticut and Texas projects provide written information to students and families as a first step of outreach. The school system in Texas working with the project distributes flyers advertising informational sessions in which families can learn more about the project and ask questions. When Connecticut project staff send letters to students and their families, they make sure that trusted contacts at school, including pre-employment transition services counselors, special education directors, and teachers, are informed and prepared to reinforce the content of the letters.

Similarly, the Minnesota project navigator will educate school staff about the project so that staff are equipped to have conversations with students and families and make referrals. The North Carolina project leverages a variety of professional contacts and resources to identify youth who may be interested. Project

Identifying participants contemplating subminimum wage employment

The SWTCIE projects can enroll participants who are either 1) working in subminimum wage employment or 2) contemplating subminimum wage employment. The projects define those contemplating this type of employment in a variety of ways, including the following:

- Students or youth ages 14 to 24
- Adults who have worked in subminimum wage employment in the past (and are considering doing so again)
- People who are on waitlists for subminimum wage employment
- Other people who are interested in the project or referred to the project who might otherwise consider subminimum wage employment. ▲

staff identify students and youth who have recently exited school by talking with schools and providers, attending transition fairs, and consulting a waitlist for Medicaid services.¹

Outreach to adults

The SWTCIE projects use several strategies to identify and recruit adult participants. A common strategy is to find participants working in subminimum wage employment through 14(c) certificate holders. For example, a large 14(c) certificate holder in North Carolina plans to discontinue its 14(c) certificate, so the project's navigator in that pilot region focuses on recruiting adults from this setting. Similarly, Texas project staff are working with two 14(c) certificate holders to identify participants. These 14(c) certificate holders allow project staff to provide informational sessions on site and permit project staff to contact people after they receive completed consent forms that indicate that people are interested in learning more. Connecticut project staff have also identified a 14(c) certificate holder that is willing to host an on-site informational session.

Despite this focus, the SWTCIE projects have experienced mixed success engaging and recruiting participants from 14(c) certificate holders. A common issue for projects is that the pool of adults in subminimum wage employment is decreasing because many certificate holders have not renewed their certification in anticipation of the potential elimination of this type of employment. In fact, the pilot area for the Minnesota project does not have any 14(c) certificate holders for this reason. Progress between projects and 14(c) certificate holders is also slow because it takes time to build relationships and foster a trusting, collaborative relationship (Shenk and Jackson-McLean 2023). A Texas project leader explained that having more direct access to potential participants is helpful because information relayed through 14(c) certificate holder staff to potential participants can "get lost in translation." Framing of the message can strongly influence whether someone is interested in learning more about a project. Adults in subminimum wage employment and their families are often very comfortable in this type of employment because they have been familiar with these settings for a long time and have work friends, have transportation arranged, and know what the job expectations are. Connecticut project leaders emphasized that the adult population is much harder to recruit than youth for these reasons.



"There's a lot of families that aren't just going to jump on board...They're hesitant to make this jump because in their eyes they see this as a very big risk....So just having a lot of those honest conversations up front, meeting folks where they're at, not coming off aggressive, coming from a place of empathy, trying to help....That's my piece of advice."

—SWTCIE project leader

The SWTCIE projects use a broad set of strategies to reach potential participants by leveraging partnerships and professional connections. For example, project leaders in North Carolina shared that one pilot site successfully reached potential participants by setting up a booth at a community barbecue. The Connecticut project will partner with the Connecticut Family Support Network to co-facilitate a virtual statewide family mentorship group, which will enable families to share fears and successes related to CIE. Project leaders hope families will better understand the benefits of CIE through the family mentorship group and more people will enroll as a result. Connecticut project staff have taken the Charting the

¹ Since the interview, North Carolina has a new Medicaid waiver and most, if not all of the people who were on the waitlist are now able to receive services under North Carolina's [Innovations Waiver](#).

LifeCourse training to help them engage participants in a similar way as their sister agency, the Department of Developmental Services, by taking the time to build relationships and understand what participants value. The Connecticut project is also considering bringing trusted voices, including self-advocates and Department of Developmental Services staff, to future informational sessions; using VR records to identify people in subminimum wage employment to invite to virtual information sessions; and seeking help from the Client Assistance Program. Other strategies that projects are using or considering include coordinating with Centers for Independent Living, identifying potential participants who have previously worked in subminimum wage employment through VR records, identifying those on 14(c) participant waitlists, asking self-advocates to invite project staff to social events so they can promote the project in informal settings, and coordinating with case managers in the state's mental health department.

Some SWTCIE projects train trusted sources to be messengers. For example, the Connecticut project met with the supervisors of Department of Developmental Services case managers so the supervisors could inform the case managers how to describe the project to people. This strategy, however, is limited by staffing shortages among case managers. Similarly, Minnesota staff will train waiver case managers about the project and its benefits, so the managers can talk with people and make referrals.



Outreach to employers

All SWTCIE projects plan to leverage existing relationships with employers in the state, including those with related state agencies, to build employer networks for CIE. Minnesota's VR agency shares a data system with other employment programs under the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. The data system shows which employers the agencies already have connections and partnerships with. The Minnesota project's business engagement specialist uses this data system to understand the existing employer network and will consult job boards to create lists of employers to engage. The Connecticut project is connecting with employers that participate in industry-specific placement programs with Connecticut's VR program.

The SWTCIE projects distribute employer-specific outreach materials that address business needs and offer a range of involvement opportunities. The employer flyer for the Texas project, for instance, includes data to highlight the benefits of providing CIE opportunities to people with I/DD.

Multiple SWTCIE projects hold meetings and trainings to answer employers' questions about disability and employment. One common employer concern to address is the myth that accommodations are prohibitively expensive. Project leaders emphasize the need to educate employers that people with I/DD are a valuable and diverse talent pool to engage. For example, though some employers in North Carolina are eager to participate with the project because of corporate hiring initiatives or familiarity with similar initiatives, other employers would benefit from more education about hiring people with I/DD for a variety of roles and how project staff will help participants hone their job skills. The Minnesota project will focus on providing progressive employment services, which should allow employers who are not yet offering CIE placement to nevertheless participate by offering tours or job shadowing opportunities.

References

Shenk, Marisa, and Gloria Jackson-McLean. "Engaging 14(c) Certificate Holders to Increase Competitive Integrated Employment." 2023. <https://www.mathematica.org/publications/engaging-14c-certificate-holders-to-increase-competitive-integrated-employment>.

This project is part of the 84.421D Disability Innovation Fund.

The contents of this brief were developed under grant number 91990020A0018/91990022F0347 from the Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C §§ 1221e-3 and 3474).▲