



1007 Mumma Road
Suite 100
Lemoyne, Pennsylvania 17043
(717) 234-2621
www.thearcpa.org

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jessica Capitani, President - Dauphin
Lucille Piggott-Prawl, 1st Vice-President - Monroe
Julie Gerhart-Rothholz, 2nd Vice-President - Montgomery
Joshua Stranix, Secretary - Schuylkill
Phil Rosenbauer, Treasurer - Butler
Sarah Holland, Immediate Past President - Lancaster
Anne Couldridge, PCE Representative - Cumberland

AT LARGE MEMBERS

Dee Barbour - Dauphin
Don Broderick - Lackawanna
Deb Brubaker - Susquehanna
Cindy Dias - Greene
Stephen Davis - Philadelphia
Jeanne Downey - Erie
Julie Gerhart-Rothholz - Montgomery
John Garyl - Dauphin
Zach Hicks - Dauphin
Gary Horner - Allegheny
Pat Leo - Montgomery
Michael Owens - Delaware
Laura Princiotta - Philadelphia
Phil Rosenbauer - Butler
Linda Wise - Montgomery
Sara Wolff - Lackawanna

EX-OFFICIO

Ken Oakes - Philadelphia
Karen Shoemaker - Lehigh-Northampton

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Sherri Landis

The Arc of Pennsylvania is affiliated with The Arc of the United States and 33 local chapters of The Arc across PA.

Written Comments
The Arc of Pennsylvania
House Labor & Industry Committee
OVR & Employment 1st Commission Overview
November 22, 2021

Thank you to Subcommittee Chairwoman Klunk for convening this informational hearing. The Arc of Pennsylvania appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the importance of employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

The Arc of Pennsylvania is a statewide nonprofit organization that provides advocacy and resources for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their families. For 72 years, we have advocated for the rights of individuals with disabilities to live, work, be educated, and play in their communities. We have over 12,000 members and 30 local chapters covering 50 counties. The Arc of Pennsylvania and its chapters are first and foremost advocates, but we also provide services. Our perspective is unique in that we are led by people with disabilities and their families, yet we know what it means to provide quality inclusion services.

We commend the actions of the General Assembly for passing Act 36 of 2018, which made Employment First the policy of Pennsylvania. This Act iterates the Commonwealth's commitment to supporting individuals with IDD in having competitive integrated employment. The work of the Employment First Commission, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), and the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) is central to ensuring people with IDD have the supports and services essential to supporting them in their employment. The Arc of Pennsylvania also commends the work of ODP in promoting competitive integrated employment and encourages them to be innovative in approaches.

Individuals with IDD across the Commonwealth want to work; however, the 2021 Report released by the Employment First Commission stated that only about 16% of individuals with IDD who receive supports from the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) have competitive-integrated employment. The Arc of Pennsylvania supports the recommendations given in the Employment First Oversight Commission 2021 Report which will help increase levels of employment among people with IDD and will ensure accountability in promoting the Employment First initiative.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the ability for people with IDD across PA to work for several reasons. First, individuals with IDD often work in jobs that could not be moved into a virtual format. Second, some individuals with IDD have medical complexities that make them more susceptible to COVID-19 and unable to continue in their work. And also, the lack of available staff to provide on-hand supports to individuals in their jobs restricted people with IDD from continuing their employment.



In order to support individuals with IDD in accessing and maintaining competitive integrated employment, The Arc of Pennsylvania makes the following recommendations:

- **Increase public-private partnerships between employers and the disability community.** The disability community is an untapped workforce that many employers do not recognize are a valuable resource for their businesses. As businesses continue to feel the effects of lack of staff, we encourage employers to look to hiring individuals with disabilities and partnering with the disability community. We encourage disability advocates, local chambers of commerce, and business engage in conversations around employment needs and how the disability community can be a resource. By increasing partnership between business and the disability community, individuals with IDD will be able to access greater competitive-integrated employment opportunities and businesses will fill vacant positions.
- **Prioritize inclusive programs for children with disabilities throughout their educational experience.** It is essential for children with IDD to access inclusive educational opportunities from Early Intervention 3 – 5 and throughout the K-12 system to support their transition into adulthood. It has been shown that students with disabilities who have greater access to inclusive educational supports and services achieve greater levels of independence and some need less supports and services once they are adults. The Commonwealth must prioritize and fund greater inclusive programming for students so that they are more equipped to transition to adulthood and gain employment.
- **Improve transitional supports and services for students with IDD.** The PA Department of Education (PDE), ODP, and OVR must continue collaborating together to support students with IDD as they transition from the school setting and into adulthood. These transition services enable students with disabilities the opportunity to gain independence through the learning of everyday tasks and access to skills and connections for securing and maintaining community integrated employment. Employment levels for people with disabilities at transition age (18-24) is even lower than those tracked under the Employment First Oversight Commission’s report. Per ODP’s Annual Comprehensive Employment Report for the Fiscal Year 2019-2020, only 14% of individuals ODP supports between the ages of 18-24 have competitive integrated employment. By improving the quality of transitional supports and services more students with IDD will be able to access competitive integrated employment that will enable them to be more independent and out in their communities.
- **Support better coordination and access to vocational education for students with more complex needs.** Often, students with more significant impact of disability are overlooked or excluded from consideration for vocational education because of the impact of their disability and the current format for expected outcomes from attendance at vocational education schools. Determinations of a student with significant impact of disabilities success at a vocational/technical school should include consideration of ability to develop a skill set in a field of vocational interest, not based only on full completion of the vocational career certificate. We continue to see advances in customized employment as a support for individual with disabilities seeking employment post public education. Therefore, access to a vocational education opportunity for students with significant impact of disability can have a profound effect increasing employment opportunities available as they exit high school.
- **Ensure that the employment supports needed by individuals with IDD can be accessed and delivered.** Throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, OVR made supported employment supports available virtually; however, allowances for customized employment services to be done virtually were not made. While some aspects of

customized employment (CE) must be completed face to face, there are many components of the service that may continue in a virtual format. The field of experts in the delivery of customized employment worked to offer direction and guidelines on effective delivery of virtual CE, but OVR did not keep pace. This left individuals who need this service waiting in their attempts to secure and maintain community integrated employment. OVR should allow for the delivery of CE virtually and make that support available to customers who need that service to be successful in employment.

- **Coordinate with ODP to increase the number of qualified providers who can deliver Customized Employment services.** In order to deliver CE services in PA, providers must attain a performance-based certification. The Arc of PA applauds Pennsylvania's recognition that effective implementation of customized employment support requires a specific skill set by providers. However, there are barriers that exist to ensuring there is an adequate number of qualified providers to deliver the service. While OVR recognizes the significant commitment by a provider to seek this performance-based training for staff, ODP is not following the same process to alleviate this barrier to an adequate support force. OVR should work with ODP to encourage the same allowance that a provider in training can support an ODP participant while completing their performance-based certification under the direction of a department recognized mentor.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments surrounding the importance of employment for individuals with IDD in the Commonwealth and ways to increase levels of community integrated employment.

Sincerely,



Sherri Landis
Executive Director
The Arc of Pennsylvania