



## How Can We Get More People with Disabilities Employed in Their Communities?

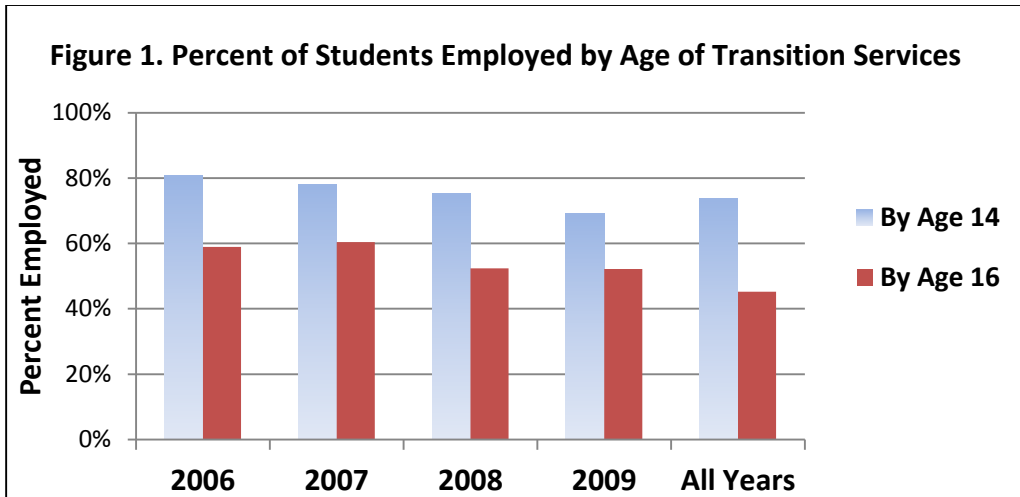
*Decreasing Service Costs While Improving Employment Outcomes.*

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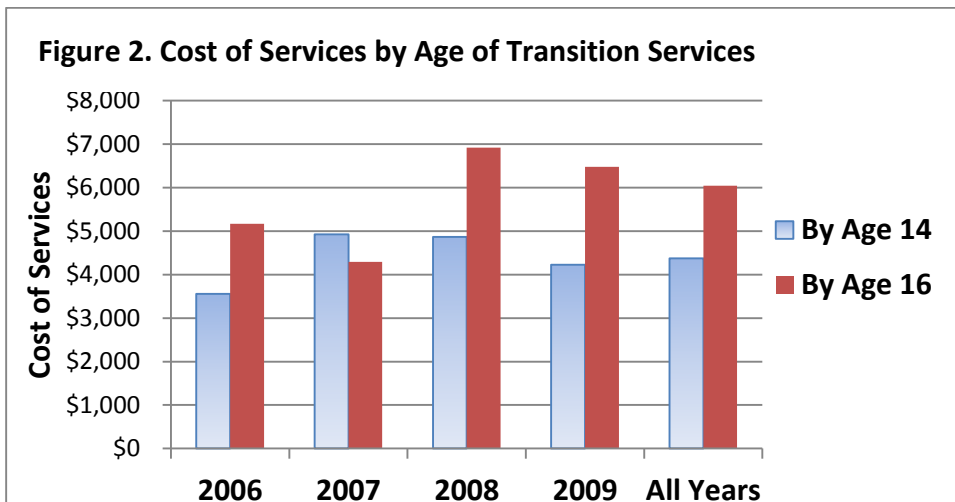
Over the past two decades, there has been a renewed effort to enable people with disabilities to become competitively employed within their communities. After all, numerous studies have found that people with disabilities want to work and that competitive employment is a good investment for both individuals and taxpayers. Unfortunately, in this current economic climate, policymakers may be reluctant to allocate the resources needed to maximize the impact that supported employment programs can achieve. As a result, a critical question needs to be addressed: ***How can we get more people with disabilities employed in the community, while reducing the cost of services that they require to be successful?***

One answer to this question is to prepare students with disabilities for adult life earlier than what is currently required. For example, a recent study<sup>i</sup> examined two groups of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). One group came from schools where transition services were provided by age sixteen, as mandated by IDEA. The other group came from schools where transition services were provided by age fourteen.

This study found that, for all four years data was examined, students from the early transition schools were far more likely to be employed than students from later transition schools. Taken as a whole, 73.7% of students who received transition services by age fourteen became employed versus only 45.2% of students who received transition services by age sixteen. (See Figure 1).

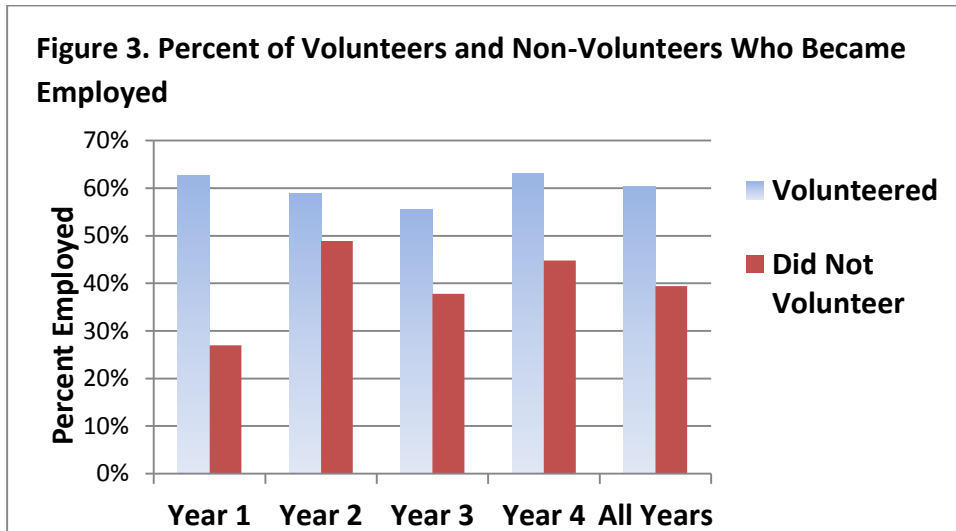


Moreover, not only were students who received earlier transition services more likely to become employed, but it was also significantly less expensive to serve them as adults in three out of the four years investigated. All totaled, students from early transition schools required services costing an average of \$4,373 to obtain and maintain employment within the community. Students from later transition schools obtained services costing \$6,040 (See Figure 2). Interestingly, many of these findings were replicated by another study examining students with intellectual disabilities.



Another strategy that increases rates of competitive employment among individuals with disabilities is to give them volunteer opportunities. Volunteering enables job seekers to obtain more experience in the work world which, in turn, makes them more marketable to employers. This theory was supported by a recent study which found that 60.3% of job seekers who had

volunteered were able to become employed. This is compared to only 39.4% of job seekers with similar demographics and disabilities who didn't volunteer. (See Figure 3).



In addition to volunteering, obtaining community-based transition experience while in high school reduces the cost of vocational services while increasing the length of time individuals remain in a job. Specifically, when students who received community-based transition services in high school were compared to similar students who received only in-school transition services, the community-based group kept their competitive jobs for 8.1 months compared to only 4.7 months for peers who had only in-school transition services.

A strategy that does *not* help people with disabilities obtain jobs in the community involves placement in facility-based programs, such as sheltered workshops. Multiple studies have found that **placement in sheltered workshops does not increase the likelihood that individuals with disabilities will become competitively employed**; moreover, the utilization of sheltered workshops increases the cost of services individuals require once they are placed in the community. Specifically, individuals with autism spectrum disorders who were in sheltered workshops prior to becoming employed in the community received services costing an average of \$8,364 in order to maintain their jobs in the community. Individuals with autism spectrum disorders who were not in sheltered workshops received services costing an average of \$4,212. Further, people who had not been sheltered workshops tended to earn more wages than peers who had been in sheltered workshops (\$191.42 v \$129.36, per week)<sup>ii</sup>. Similar results were found for individuals with intellectual disabilities<sup>iii</sup>. The authors of these studies speculated that sheltered employees learn skills in workshops which have to be “unlearned” once in the community (e.g., dependence on cues from agency staff), thus resulting in more supervision by job coaches and more costs to the taxpayer.

So how can policymakers and practitioners increase the number of people with disabilities employed within the community, while reducing the cost of services that they require to be successful? One way is to provide transition services as early as possible; after all, it takes a lifetime to prepare for a lifetime. ***Expecting individuals with and without disabilities to start preparing for their adult lives while in high school is too late.***

Providing services within the community is also beneficial. Students with disabilities who have had community-based experiences in high school fare much better than do students who do not receive community-based experiences. This makes sense. The more experiences they have, the better prepared they will be.

Finally, the utilization of sheltered workshops as preparation for community-based employment appears to have negative consequences. Students who enter facility-based programs cost more to serve in the community and earn less than students who forgo facility-based placements.

Of course, the supports and services provided should be based upon the unique needs of each individual, not research studies. Still, extensive research confirms effective ways of getting more workers with disabilities employed in the community while reducing the costs of the services they require to be successful.

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<sup>i</sup> Cimera, R.E., Burgess, S., & Wiley, A. (2013) Does providing transition services early enable students with ASD to achieve better vocational outcomes as adults? *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 38(2), 88-93.

<sup>ii</sup> Cimera, R.E., Wehman, P., West, M., & Burgess, S. (2012). Do sheltered workshops enhance employment outcomes for adults with autism spectrum disorder? *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 16(1) 87-94.

<sup>iii</sup> Cimera, R.E. (2011). Does being in sheltered workshops improve the employment outcomes of supported employees with intellectual disabilities? *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 35, 21-27.