

# Providing supports to youth with disabilities transitioning to adulthood: Case descriptions from the Youth Transition Demonstration

Richard G. Luecking<sup>a,\*</sup> and David Wittenburg<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*TransCen, Inc., Rockville, MD, USA*

<sup>b</sup>*Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, NJ, USA*

Received 13 February 2009

**Abstract.** Post-school employment rates for youth with significant disabilities remain intractably low. An important policy concern is whether youth who receive disability cash benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) are obtaining the necessary supports to make a successful transition to adult life. The SSA initiated the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) projects in an attempt to develop services and supports to assist youth in making a successful transition into adulthood. This article provides a detailed description of the intervention components for the YTD projects and presents three case descriptions to illustrate how youth can potentially benefit from these services. The selected cases in this paper illustrate the potential for youth with disabilities to leverage project services and move into employment.

**Keywords:** Transition, youth, disabilities, Social Security, SSA, demonstration, intervention, evaluation

## 1. Introduction

An important policy concern is whether youth who receive disability cash benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) are obtaining the necessary supports to make a successful transition to adult life. Health issues, service needs, and lack of access to supports can complicate planning and preparing for schooling, work, and independent living. Hemmeter, Kauff, and Wittenburg [12] showed that many former young disability beneficiaries have few prospects for employment during their early adult years and outcomes for child Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients with psychiatric impairments are particularly poor.

The SSA initiated the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) projects in an attempt to develop services

and supports to assist youth in making a successful transition into adulthood. The YTD projects provide a broad array of transition-related services and supports for youth ages 14 to 25 who receive SSI or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments on the basis of their own disability. The projects, which can coordinate with schools and existing service providers in their communities, place an emphasis on promoting employment as a key outcome. However, they have flexibility in the interventions they develop, the subgroups of youths they serve, and the services and supports they provide. SSA has contracted with a team led by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) and its subcontractors, MDRC and TransCen, Inc., to provide technical and evaluation assistance for YTD.

This article provides a detailed description of the intervention components for the YTD projects and presents three case descriptions to illustrate how youth can potentially benefit from these services. The intervention components were developed using information on widely recognized effective practices geared to

---

\*Address for correspondence: Richard G. Luecking, TransCen, Inc., 451 Hungerford Drive, Suite 700, Rockville, MD 20850, USA. Tel.: +1 301 424 2002 x 230; Fax: +1 301 251 3762; E-mail: rluecking@transcen.org.

youth with disabilities and then tailored to address barriers faced by youth who receive SSA disability benefits. The selected case descriptions provide an in-depth look at project services at two select YTD projects and illustrate the potential for these types of interventions to promote employment for youth with disabilities.

We begin by summarizing issues that might impede a youth's successful transition into adulthood, with a specific focus on the experiences of child SSI recipients who comprise the majority of the YTD target population. Next, we describe intervention efforts targeted to youth with disabilities and discuss how these findings were used to develop the core intervention components for YTD. We then present three case descriptions of experiences in YTD and describe how these interventions were used by the youth to achieve an employment outcome. We conclude with a summary of findings and implications for YTD projects and other related interventions targeted to youth with disabilities.

## 2. Background on issues facing youth with disabilities

For more than two decades, there has been a concerted federal policy initiative to improve the post-school employment outcomes for youth receiving special education services [26]. In addition, special education law has required transition planning to be a critical element of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students receiving special education services since 1990 (IDEA of 1990, PL 101-476). The impetus for these and related policy and legislative thrusts has been twofold: (1) the recognition that youth with disabilities should have the opportunity to achieve a meaningful and productive post-school life that includes employment, and (2) evolving transition practice that has shown that such outcomes are achievable with the proper education preparation, employment opportunity, and support services.

Contemporary analysis of post-school outcomes of youth with disabilities suggests that these dual thrusts are beginning to have the desired impact. The most recent examination of what happens to youth with disabilities as they exit publicly supported education shows an employment rate that is modestly rising from what was common 20 years ago [24]. Youth in almost all categories of disabilities are faring better in terms of employment. For students with disabilities who finished school in the late 1980's, the cross-disability aggregate post-school employment rate two to five years

out of school was just over 50 percent [2]. In more recent years, the overall percentage of youth working after leaving high school increased by nine percentage points across the aggregate of all youth with disabilities. Significantly improved employment outcomes are especially apparent for youth with learning disabilities [20]. Clearly, notable strides have been made in what is known about how youth with disabilities are prepared for the world of work, reflecting the long-standing aim of policy, legislation, and advocacy from the disability community.

Unfortunately, youth considered to have significant disabilities are not experiencing comparable gains in post-school employment rates. The news is particularly disappointing for some categories of youth. Those with intellectual disabilities have considerably lower employment rates than youth in other disability categories [4]. In fact, sub-minimum wage and sheltered employment remain a predominant outcome for thousands of people with intellectual disabilities [3]. The circumstances are further complicated because youth with intellectual disabilities comprise a growing waiting list for post-school employment services and demands for these services tax the ability of service providers to support positive employment outcomes [8, 22].

Recent studies show that the subgroup of youth who receive SSI benefits achieve notably poorer employment outcomes than other youth with disabilities, which in part might reflect their limited work experiences [1, 10]. For many low-income families, SSI provides an important source of cash benefits and, equally important, access to health insurance through Medicaid.<sup>1</sup> To qualify for SSI, children under age 18 and their families must meet strict income, asset, and disability eligibility criteria. SSI recipients who work and earn income above a certain threshold generally face the prospect of losing \$1 of benefits for every \$2 of earnings, though SSA has established a number of work incentives for SSI recipients. However, Wittenburg and Loprest [28] report that only 22 percent of child SSI recipients age 14 to 17 have ever heard of the SSA work incentives or discussed them with an SSA representative. Upon reaching age 18, child SSI recipients must undergo a redetermination of eligibility, using the adult definition of disability, to continue receiving SSI benefits. The uncertainty of the age 18 redetermination might influ-

---

<sup>1</sup>See Davies, Rupp, and Wittenburg [9] for an overview of the SSI program.

ence a youth's decision to seek education, training, and work skills prior to age 18, as well as family decisions regarding work and investment in human capital. Because of these challenges, the National Council on Disability [19] noted that these youth are at risk for indefinite poverty due to their lack of employment, with many relying solely on cash benefits from SSI and other federal income support programs.

Loprest and Wittenburg [15] showed that many youth who received SSI prior to age 18 struggle in their initial transition to adulthood. They showed that only 22 percent of youth ages 19 to 23 who received child SSI benefits prior to age 18 were employed at the time of the survey, and 39 percent of this group had dropped out of school. Additionally, the majority of these youth were not engaged in any employment, education, or vocational rehabilitation activity.

The findings of Hemmeter, Kauff, and Wittenburg [12] indicate that outcomes are particularly poor for subgroups of former child SSI beneficiaries who have mental and behavioral disorders. They showed that, relative to other impairment groups, youth with mental and behavioral disorders have higher rates of problem behaviors prior to age 18. There are various factors that might influence these issues, including the youth's demographic, health, and family background characteristics (for example, many come from single parent families; see Rupp and Ressler [21]), as well as limitations in the service environment that provides transition supports.

Overall, youth on SSI face an uphill struggle to gain sustainable employment that will eliminate, or at least minimize, their need for associated benefits. The limited engagement in employment and education activities is a particularly worrisome development that suggests that many youth might never be fully self-sufficient.

These circumstances underscore the potential need for intervention services. There is some descriptive evidence that suggests youth with significant disabilities can benefit from additional training and work experience, though many initiatives that provide these types of services have not been rigorously evaluated [16,25].

The opportunity to access intervention services before a youth enrolls in SSI is important and is a primary goal of the Youth Transition Demonstration [12]. This type of investment could also represent a large savings to SSA if youth with disabilities are able to minimize their reliance on program benefits, which can last a lifetime. The challenge, then, is to meld effective transition practice with the availability of incentives and resources so that youth on SSI, or at risk of receiving

SSI, can be assisted to achieve improved employment outcomes, decreased reliance on SSI benefits, and enhanced overall financial status.

### 3. Intervention efforts

Youth with disabilities face many personal barriers that can affect their transition into adulthood and eventual self-sufficiency. Frequently, they make the transition in a service system that is uncoordinated and offers only limited access to the post-secondary services.

Since the concerted federal policy focus on transition from school to work began in earnest in the mid 1980s, there have been ongoing efforts to demonstrate, refine, and evaluate transition methodology. Simultaneously, there have been efforts to identify those factors that affect optimum post-school outcomes, especially post-school employment outcomes. Despite the fact that few studies of the transition from school to work by youth with disabilities have involved classic research rigor or empirically validated interventions, they nevertheless have led to general agreement among researchers and practitioners on appropriate interventions that promise a favorable impact on transition outcomes.

Attempts to identify factors associated with successful post school employment outcomes include two recent attempts to synthesize two decades of research related to youth in transition in order to apply the features of effective interventions and refine them in practice. The first was conducted by the National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASET). Through representatives of more than 30 national advocacy groups, professional organizations, and education associations, NASET conducted a thorough review of research on what youth need to succeed as they transition from secondary education. Using this research synthesis, NASET produced a set of standards and quality indicators for identifying critical needs for all youth, including those with disabilities [17]. These standards consist of five general areas of intervention that the research suggests are important in promoting desirable school-to-work transition outcomes. They include: *support in receiving academic instruction* and curriculum that targets academic achievement; *career preparatory experiences*, including vocational training and work experiences; *youth development and youth leadership*, especially as it relates to self-determined transition planning; *family involvement* that supports youth transition and work goals; and *connecting activities*, that is, those activities that enable youth to

be linked with organizations and services that complement their transition services and/or provide necessary post-secondary supports.

Drawing from the NASET framework, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Y) conducted its own extensive review of research, demonstration projects, and acknowledged effective practices. From this review, NCWD/Y [18] developed a practical tool, called *Guideposts for Success*, to help practitioners and policymakers conceptualize optimum service delivery for youth with disabilities. *Guideposts for Success* features nearly the same areas highlighted by NASET, but slightly reconstituted to include: school-based preparatory experiences, career preparation and work-based experiences, youth development and leadership, connecting activities, and family involvement and supports.

Both the NASET and NCWD/Y syntheses highlight work experiences and work as essential elements for preparing youth with disabilities for post-school employment success. In fact, there is emerging support of the efficacy of transition models that feature work experience for youth with significant disabilities. Although reports about the implementation of these models do not necessarily focus on SSI recipients, the models nevertheless target youth who may be at risk of applying for and receiving SSI benefits.

One transition service model, called the Transition Service Integration Model (TSIM), has yielded high post-school employment for youth exiting school at age 21 without regular diplomas [5,16]. Youth participating in TSIM are considered to have significant disabilities; they include individuals with moderate-to-profound intellectual disabilities, some of whom also have a secondary sensory or physical disability. TSIM features work experiences, employment in authentic workplaces, and the integration of service between schools and adult employment service agencies prior to school exit. The intended result of TSIM is a seamless transition from school to adult life so that the first day after school exit looks no different than the last day in school: the same job and the same supports are in place to assure long-term employment success.

Similarly, two models of transition services to youth considered to have significant emotional disabilities (SED) employ comparable methodologies that feature work and person-centered support services. Clark and Davis [6] describe the Transition to Independence Process (TIP), a service delivery system for youth with SED that melds personal choice and responsibility, individually tailored supports, and work experiences

so that youth are engaged in planning their own futures. Improved progress and post-secondary outcomes have been consistently reported for youth in the TIP system [14]. Another promising program serving youth with SED is called the Career Transition Program (CTP) [27]. CTP features individualized, person-centered planning; flexible case management and support; career guidance and work experience; interagency collaboration; and family support activities. The linchpin of the CTP model is the pursuit of paid employment experiences that are augmented by personalized staff support. Three primary goals of CTP are promoting high school completion, employment, and enrollment in post-secondary education.

These transition models suggest that employment can be both a key transition intervention strategy and a potentially sustainable outcome for transitioning youth with significant disabilities. That is, under conditions of person-centered and individualized work experiences, augmented by appropriate support and service system collaboration, youth empowerment, and family supports, it is possible for youth with significant disabilities to obtain substantial employment. While these models are promising, they have yet to be tested formally using a rigorous evaluation.

#### 4. The Youth Transition Demonstration

In 2003, SSA initiated the national Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD). The evaluation of the YTD began in 2005 and will continue through 2014. The national YTD evaluation provides an opportunity to test out these promising models using a rigorous evaluation design (random assignment) in several projects. Specifically, as noted in Fraker and Rangarajan [11], six of the 10 YTD sites will each serve up to 480 youth over a three-year period. Through implementation of transition interventions in 10 sites across the United States, the YTD is generating empirical evidence, based on both process and random-assignment evaluations, on the impacts of SSI work incentive waivers and enhanced transition services for youth with disabilities.

The YTD intervention components build heavily on the NCWD/Y's *Guideposts for Success* and are tailored to address the unique needs of youth who receive SSA disability benefits. The YTD projects have great flexibility in structuring their interventions, though each project must include the following seven components:

1. **Individualized work-based experiences.** These experiences could include combinations of the following: career exploration, job shadowing, volunteer work, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment.
2. **Youth empowerment.** Youth empowerment refers to the acquisition of self-knowledge by youth so that they may direct and advocate for their life choices.
3. **Family supports.** Family supports are necessary to actively engage family members in the intervention to gain a better understanding of project services, work incentives (including the SSA waivers described below), and other related services that might benefit the youth.
4. **System linkages.** Two types of system linkages are useful in transition interventions. The first is the linkage of academic coursework with work-based experiences. Such a linkage often makes coursework relevant to students, keeps them engaged in academic curricula so they are less likely to drop out of school, and/or creates an applied learning environment. The second type of linkage, particularly relevant to YTD, is a network of ancillary and post-secondary services that are closely coordinated and focused on youth with disabilities. Many youth, especially those who might participate in YTD, will require employment support before, during, and after school exit.
5. **Social and health services.** Many youth with disabilities may need social and health services to facilitate their success in the classroom, in the community, and on the job. This metaservice is commonly referred to as “case management,” “wrap-around services,” or “care coordination.”
6. **SSA work incentive waivers.** The waivers are intended to encourage youth to initiate or increase their work activity and to increase their earnings or continue with their education.
7. **Benefits counseling.** Care must be taken to design and deliver counseling in such a way as to avoid encouraging youth who are not receiving disability benefits to apply for them and to avoid encouraging youth who are receiving benefits to limit their earnings. In addition, counseling must encourage the accurate reporting of earnings to SSA to avoid benefit overpayments and the consequences of the subsequent recovery of those overpayments.

In Table 1, we provide examples of each intervention component that sites might choose to implement as part of their interventions. The examples illustrate the range of options that sites have in designing their interventions to meet the needs of their target populations. For a more detailed description of the interventions being implemented across YTD projects, see Fraker and Rangarajan [11].

## 5. Case descriptions

To illustrate how youth are using YTD services to gain employment, we selected three case descriptions from two YTD projects that were in SSA's first phase of projects selected for implementation. We focused on these projects because they had well-developed interventions. In addition, we were able to work with these projects to obtain permission to interview the youth and consent to publicly present their findings.

Two of the youth – Darnell and Joe – received services from the Mississippi Model Youth Transition Innovation (MYTI) project. The MYTI project was conceptualized as a model transition process in which local school districts apply state-of-the-art customized employment techniques to facilitate optimal passage from school to work for students with significant disabilities. A unique feature of the MYTI project is that it is characterized by a systems change approach in which school systems, administrators, and teachers are challenged to use individual discovery and other customized employment approaches to shape day-to-day student experiences.

The third youth – Alessandro – received services from the California Bridges to Youth Self Sufficiency (California Bridges) project. This is a school-based project that offers information services, intensive service coordination, and benefits planning to youth throughout secondary education. The project team works in school settings to connect youth with important system supports from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and other post-secondary services. A critical aspect of the project is linking youth with work experiences prior to school exit, with the goal of paid employment at the time of school exit.

The selected case descriptions involve youth who achieved an employment outcome, which is a primary goal for the YTD projects. Each of the case descriptions illustrates the core YTD components described in Table 1, with a particular emphasis on paid work, special YTD work incentives, and benefits counseling.

Table 1  
Examples of YTD intervention components

Component	Examples
Individualized Work-Based Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Career exploration consists of visits by a youth to workplaces to learn about jobs and the skills required to perform them</li> <li>– Job shadowing involves extended time, often a full workday, spent by a youth in a workplace accompanying an employee in the performance of his or her daily duties</li> <li>– Volunteer work, or work sampling, is unpaid work by a youth in a work environment to learn aspects of potential careers and to learn “soft skills” required in the workplace</li> <li>– Internships, paid or unpaid, are formal arrangements whereby a youth is assigned specific tasks at a workplace over a predetermined period of time</li> <li>– Apprenticeships are formal, sanctioned work experiences of extended duration in which an apprentice learns specific occupational skills related to a standardized trade</li> <li>– Paid employment may include existing standard jobs in an organization or created work assignments, as well as work scheduled during or after school hours</li> </ul>
Youth Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Training for educators, service providers, and families in enabling youth to take more responsibility for decision making</li> <li>– Self-determination skills for youth so that they can make informed choices about education and other services based on their own preferences and self-knowledge</li> <li>– Self-knowledge by youth of their needs for learning and workplace accommodations, combined with self-advocacy for those accommodations</li> <li>– Opportunities for youth to practice self-management and responsible decision making that reflect healthy and informed choices</li> <li>– Student-directed IEP planning and goal setting</li> </ul>
System Linkages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High school curricula linked with work experiences, such as work-study assignments, project-based assignments related to career exploration, and/or practical vocational skill development</li> <li>– Interagency planning teams that bring together school personnel, vocational rehabilitation counselors, adult service providers, and/or other representatives of services that may be required to facilitate and monitor collaborative efforts well in advance of projected school exit</li> <li>– Written and enforceable interagency agreements that structure the provision of collaborative transition services, including the sharing of staff and funding resources</li> <li>– A plan for a seamless “hand-off” of youth supports, such as job coaching, so that supports that were initiated during the secondary school years can continue as necessary upon exit from school</li> </ul>
Family Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Training for families to take an active role (along with schools and community partners) in transition planning</li> <li>– Training and information for families about programs, services, supports, and accommodations for young people with disabilities</li> <li>– Counseling for families to foster high expectations for employment and community participation by youth with disabilities; expectations based on each youth’s unique strengths, interests, and needs</li> <li>– Providing families with access to information about employment, educational opportunities, and community resources for youth with disabilities</li> <li>– Providing families with opportunities to share through peer support networks their experiences in supporting the transition to adult life by their children with disabilities</li> </ul>
Social and Health Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individualized mental health services such as personal counseling, psychotropic medication prescription and monitoring, and in-patient acute mental health care</li> <li>– Monitoring of prescribed care regimens, including management of the transfer of care from pediatric to adult health systems, identification of health care providers who treat Medicaid patients, and other services that may be required to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of health care</li> <li>– Referral to specific social services to address life and family needs such as transportation, child care, housing, income support, and so forth</li> <li>– Access to recreational opportunities to build physical and social skills that will improve quality of life</li> <li>– Mentoring relationships with adult role models, with and without disabilities</li> </ul>
Waivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Earned Income Exclusion (EIE) which allows out-of-school youth to retain SSI cash benefits on a reduction ratio of one dollar of benefit for each four dollars earned, rather than the standard EIE ratio of one to two</li> <li>– Expanded Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), which allows youth still in school to be eligible longer and earn more money before cash benefits are affected</li> <li>– Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS), which expands the use of PASS for career exploration and education costs</li> <li>– Individual Development Accounts (IDA), savings accounts owned by participants that include matched contributions from approved sources, are not counted when determining the monthly SSI benefit</li> </ul>

Table 1, continued

Component	Examples
	– Continuing Disability Review (CDR) or Age 18 Medical Redetermination, which allows YTD participants to remain eligible for SSI benefits for the duration of participation in YTD, regardless of the outcome of a continuing disability review (CDR) or age 18 medical redetermination
Benefits Counseling	– Counseling for youth and their parents and families, provided by specifically assigned YTD project staff, on work incentives, the implications of earnings for benefits, record keeping, medical documentation, reporting of earnings, and so on.

The goal in presenting these studies is to illustrate how YTD project services can be used to assist youth in finding employment. In reviewing these outcomes, it is important to note that they might not be typical for all participants in these projects. Nonetheless, they provide an in-depth qualitative perspective on how youth are using services in select YTD sites.

### 5.1. Darnell

Darnell is 20 years old, lives with his mother, and receives monthly SSI benefits. He and his mother live in an area of Mississippi that was affected by Hurricane Katrina and, as a result, they were displaced from their home into temporary housing. Darnell attends a school for students who have been identified by the school system as having significant intellectual and other disabilities. He is scheduled to complete his publicly supported education during the year he turns 21 as allowed by special education law.

When Darnell was 16, his teachers referred him to the MYTI project. At that time, the MYTI staff met with Darnell, his mother, and his teachers to identify what he liked to do, what he was good at, and what types of supports and accommodations he might need to perform well in a job. This person-centered assessment process led to the identification of a list of tasks that he could be expected to perform well, including vacuuming and placing labels on boxes. It was also determined that he liked to be around people and that he needed initial instruction and coaching to learn new tasks. As a result, the MYTI staff helped Darnell negotiate a job at a large chain shoe store that was customized to his individual traits and preferences. Since he started the job four years ago, his tasks have included vacuuming the store carpet, placing labels on shoe boxes that identify oversized shoes, unloading shipments, stocking shelves, greeting customers, and setting up displays in the store windows.

During his time at the store, Darnell has been empowered to make more and more of his decisions. He

negotiates schedule changes so that he can attend school events, and he has negotiated taking on more tasks and more hours. Each year his tasks and responsibilities at the store have increased as he has learned new skills and as the store manager has assigned tasks that augment and support the work of other associates (such as the cashiers) so that they can more efficiently attend to the store's customers. For the last four years that Darnell has worked at this job, components of his formal Individual Education Plan have included objectives related to his work at the shoe store. In effect, his job has been a major part of his educational service.

As Darnell has progressed in his work experience, MYTI staff have ensured that he and his mother have been fully involved in managing his SSI benefits. In fact, his mother had trepidations about Darnell working until the staff explained the mathematics of the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), that is, the fact that his wages would minimally affect his monthly benefits while he was a student. Darnell has been taught how to present his pay stubs to the Social Security office each month so that his income is reported properly and so that he is able to take full advantage of the special work incentive rules that apply to his participation in MYTI. In addition, with the help of MYTI staff he has established an Individual Development Account (IDA). To help him understand how to manage his IDA, Darnell is required to participate in a financial literacy class. He hopes to accumulate enough savings to eventually make a down payment for a home of his own because he wants to live in something different than a "Katrina cottage."

As Darnell gets ready to exit school, he will have to rely on public, rather than school-provided, transportation to get to his job. He will use SSA's Impairment Related Work Expense provision to help pay for that cost. Thus, three specific SSI work incentives have contributed to Darnell's success at work and to his overall improved financial situation: the Student Earned Income Exclusion, the Individual Development Account, and the Impairment Related Work Expense. It is Darnell's

plan to continue indefinitely in his job. When he leaves school, he will no longer be eligible for the SEIE but he will become eligible for another work incentive, the Earned Income Exclusion (EIE). His SSI monthly benefits will be reduced as his earnings increase, but not so much that he will not be able to maintain sufficient income to support himself financially. As a result, his transition from school to adult life is well on its way. Because of a combination of successful work experience, special SSI work incentive rules, and counseling to manage the effects of his earnings on his SSI benefits, he will exit school with a job at which he excels and which he enjoys, as well as with a significant head start on a financially independent life.

### 5.2. *Joe*

Like Darnell, Joe was a participant in the MYTI YTD demonstration. He became involved in MYTI during his last year in school, shortly before receiving his high school certificate of completion at age 21. The MYTI staff worked with Joe and his family to boost employment expectations; to identify interests, skill sets, and potential accommodation needs due to multiple disabilities; and to learn how his SSI and net monthly income might be affected by working. Linkage to supportive post-school services was also a key to his eventual transition to adult employment.

Through a person-centered planning process that empowered Joe to express his interests and identified his many work-related competencies, the MYTI staff helped him obtain his stated "dream job" as a customer service associate at a nearby grocery store that is part of a large regional chain. Joe's work assignments include bagging groceries and retrieving grocery carts from the parking lot. He received initial job coaching assistance, which quickly faded in favor of support from his supervisor and co-workers. He was linked to the state vocational rehabilitation agency, which helped him acquire the necessary work clothes for his job. He now works full-time, between 35 and 50 hours per week, depending on the store's needs. He receives employer-provided health care and is eligible for his company's retirement annuity plan. His career seems set and his two recent Employee of the Month awards indicate that he has the confidence and support of his employer to stay as long as he wants.

Parallel to his job search, Joe and his mother were counseled about how work might affect his SSI benefits and how the special work incentives could work in his favor as he considered job prospects. The enhanced

YTD EIE did much to reassure Joe's mother about the effect of his earnings on his SSI. As Joe began his employment, MYTI staff helped him use the EIE so that his net income favored the pursuit and retention of a job. MYTI staff also helped Joe arrange door-to-door public paratransit to and from his job, the cost of which is offset by the use of the SSA's Impairment Related Work Expense provision. With the help of MYTI staff and his mother's approval, Joe opened an IDA so that he can pursue another long-term goal, owning his own home. As his job earnings increased, his SSI benefits have decreased to the point that he is now totally independent of SSI cash benefits.

Through the careful development of a self-determined employment plan, informed guidance from benefits counselors, support to his family about work expectations and benefits management, and linkage with state VR services, Joe's situation represents an example of the effective melding of transition interventions with targeted work incentives.

### 5.3. *Alessandro*

Alessandro is enrolled in California Bridges, one of the YTD projects described above. Before his association with California Bridges, Alessandro's work experience during high school was limited to a part-time job at a supermarket. Unfortunately, he could not hold this job for long as he had difficulty maintaining his stamina due to his physical disability. As he was nearing the end of his public special education, he wanted to work. His mother was supportive of his pursuing work, but both were concerned about the effect a job would have on his SSI benefits. Thus, planning for a job search would have to involve careful consideration of Alessandro's interests, skills, accommodation needs, family support, linkages to post-school support, and benefits management.

As a result of planning that fully involved Alessandro and his mother, the school system collaborated with California Bridges to refer Alessandro to an unpaid training internship opportunity at a community hospital's cardiology department. The cardiology department is one of several areas of the hospital that agreed to offer such work experiences, which generally lasted three months. At the end of the three months, the youth interns either began another three-month internship rotation at another hospital department or used the experience as a resume builder for a job search outside of the hospital.

During the internship at the cardiology department, Alessandro sampled several tasks, including faxing cardiology reports to doctors, cleaning beds used by patients as they prepped for diagnostic tests, retrieving equipment for other staff members, and filing diagnostic reports. Early in the internship, he especially struggled with filing. His first few weeks at the work site he used a full-time job coach to assist him with learning his tasks and identifying ways to accommodate his disability. One of the accommodations was for him to attach a self-sticking note to files so someone could go back and check to make sure they were in the right place. This helped him catch on to the hospital's special filing process. During the internship, Alessandro became proficient in his other tasks as well, to the point that near the end of his internship the hospital decided it wanted to hire him for a long-term paid job. Thus, the internship resulted in a job that he now holds. The school personnel referred him to a local supported employment vendor so that he could receive ongoing periodic job coaching support as he left school. This linkage enabled him to seamlessly transition as an employed adult with good long-term employment prospects.

The concerns that Alessandro and his mother had about the potential effect of his wages on his SSI benefits were eased through help with benefits planning provided by California Bridges. A Certified Work Incentives Counselor worked with them to report his earnings to SSA and to calculate the enhanced EIE that he was eligible for as a participant in the YTD. Alessandro's endurance allows him to work 20 hours per week, earning \$9.20 hour. His SSI benefits continue at a reduced amount, but with the EIE, which allows him to earn \$4 before he loses \$1 of his SSI cash benefit, he and his mother are comfortable with the net income.

Alessandro now consistently receives excellent work reviews at his job. He seems set for long-term employment at a job he likes, with less SSI but with income security that has significantly elevated his financial status. Like Darnell and Joe, he has benefited from strong transition service methodology, notable work experience, and linkages with post-school services. Targeted SSI benefits counseling complemented his work, which enabled him to take best advantage of the YTD work incentives. This ultimately enabled him to pursue work knowing that he could retain sufficient benefits for financial support.

## 6. Implications

The goal of the YTD projects is to identify interventions that address the barriers and service gaps faced

by youth with disabilities who are receiving or at risk of receiving SSA disability benefits. The interventions include service components that are aimed at helping youth with disabilities maximize their economic self-sufficiency as they transition into early adulthood. In addition to increased services for youth with disabilities, SSA's vision for the demonstration projects is that better-coordinated and integrated service delivery systems will be in place. The projects also include enhanced work incentives through waivers that should increase the attractiveness of working while receiving benefits. While the YTD projects differ in their approaches to providing services, all the projects share common intervention components that build off the knowledge of the best available practices in serving youth with disabilities.

The selected case descriptions in this paper illustrate the potential for youth with disabilities to leverage project services and move into employment. Each example illustrates the intervention components of the YTD, that is, youth empowerment, family supports, system and service linkages, benefits waivers, benefits counseling, and work experiences. It is especially the latter component that holds significant promise, as reflected in the case descriptions and as identified by previous research, which has shown work experience to be singularly important in predicting post-school outcomes. As the case descriptions show, employment is both a key transition intervention and the ultimate measure of successful post-school outcomes.

Some caution must be used in assessing the overall effectiveness of the YTD interventions until the YTD projects can be rigorously evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative data. The current national YTD evaluation described by Fraker and Rangarajan [11] will generate some answers about the efficacy of the YTD approaches in the field and whether these services should be expanded to a larger pool of beneficiaries. The consequent guidance about both the successes and limitations of these approaches to both policymakers and practitioners will be invaluable.

Concerted policy and legislative initiatives made over more than two decades have shown encouraging movement toward better post-school outcomes for most youth with disabilities. Through anecdotal information and through studies such as SSA's National Youth Transition Demonstration evaluation, there is an additional body of knowledge emerging about how to address barriers to employment for economically poor youth with the most significant disabilities. Although this group has so far not achieved outcomes that oth-

er groups of youth with disabilities are achieving, we are at least aware of promising methodology. There is much to be gained by thoroughly examining these evolving approaches so that policy and practice reflects what is learned from the analysis.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the editorial and production assistance of Cindy George and Cindy McClure. The authors wish to acknowledge Lisa Ladner and Kathy Williams of the Mississippi Model Youth Transition Innovation (MYTI) project and Roberta Menn of Saddleback Valley Unified School District, Mission Viejo, CA, who provided key background information on the case examples included in this article. The research described in this paper was funded by a contract from the Social Security Administration (number SS00-05-60084) to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Social Security Administration. Nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Social Security Administration.

## References

- [1] H. Berry, The supplemental security income program and employment for young adults with disabilities: An analysis of the National Health Interview Survey on Disability, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* **15** (2000), 176–181.
- [2] J. Blackorby and M. Wagner, Longitudinal post school outcomes of youth with disabilities: Findings from the national longitudinal transition study, *Exceptional Children* **62** (1996), 399–413.
- [3] D. Braddock, M. Rizzolo and R. Hemp, Most employment services growth in developmental disabilities during 1988-2002 was in segregated settings, *Mental Retardation* **42** (2004), 317–320.
- [4] R. Cameto, C. Marder, M. Wagner and D. Cardoso, *Youth Employment*, NLT2 Data Brief, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2003.
- [5] N.J. Certo, D. Mautz, I. Pumpian, C. Sax, K. Smalley, H. Wade, D. Noyes, R. Luecking, J. Wechsler and N. Batterman, A review and discussion of a model for seamless transition to adulthood, *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities* **38** (1) (2003), 3–17.
- [6] H.B. Clark and M. Davis, *Transition of Youth and Young Adults with Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties into Adulthood*, Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2000.
- [7] D.A. Colley and D. Jamison, Post school results for youth with disabilities: Key indicators and policy implications, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* **21** (1998), 145–160.
- [8] R. Connelly, Supported employment in Maryland: Successes and issues, *Mental Retardation* **41** (2003), 237–249.
- [9] P. Davies, K. Rupp and D. Wittenburg, A Life-cycle Perspective on the Transition to Adulthood Among Children Receiving Supplemental Security Income Payments, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **30**(3) (2009), 133–151.
- [10] E. Fabian, Urban youth with disabilities: Factors affecting transition employment, *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* **50**(3) (2007), 130–138.
- [11] T. Fraker and A. Rangarajan, The Social Security Administration's Youth Transition Demonstration Projects, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **30**(3) (2009), 223–240.
- [12] J. Hemmeter, J. Kauff and D. Wittenburg, Changing Circumstances: Experiences of Child SSI Recipients Before and After Their Age-18 Redetermination for Adult Benefits, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **30**(3) (2009), 201–221.
- [13] Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, PL 101-476, 20 U.S.C., 1400 *et seq.*
- [14] A. Karpur, H.B. Clark, P. Caproni and H. Sterner, Transition to adult roles for students with emotional/behavioral disturbances: A follow-up study of student exiters from Steps-to-Success, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* **28** (2005), 36–46.
- [15] P. Loprest and D. Wittenburg, Post-transition experiences of former child SSI recipients, *Social Service Review* **4** (2007), 583–608.
- [16] R. Luecking and N. Certo, Service integration at the point of transition for youth with significant disabilities: A model that works, *American Rehabilitation* **27** (2003), 2–9.
- [17] National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASSET), *National standards and quality indicators: Transition toolkit for systems improvement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration, 2005.
- [18] National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth (NCWD/Y), *Guideposts for Success*. Washington, DC: Institute on Educational Leadership, 2005.
- [19] National Council on Disability (NCD) (2000). *Transition and post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities: Closing the gaps to post-secondary education and employment*. Retrieved from [www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/transition\\_11-1-00.html#1](http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/transition_11-1-00.html#1).
- [20] National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) (2003, December), *NLTS2 data brief: Youth employment, a report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2*. Retrieved August 2007 from [www.ncset.org/publications/default.asp#nlts2](http://www.ncset.org/publications/default.asp#nlts2).
- [21] K. Rupp and S. Ressler, Family Caregiving and Employment among Parents of Children with Disabilities on SSI, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **30**(3) (2009).
- [22] R. Stancliffe and C. Lakin, *Costs and Outcomes of Community Services for People with Intellectual Disabilities*, Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2005.
- [23] M. Wagner, L. Newman, R. Cameto, N. Garza and P. Levine, *After High School: A First Look at the Postschool Experiences of Youth with Disabilities. A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2005.
- [24] M. Wagner, L. Newman, R. Cameto and P. Levine, *Changes Over Time in the Early Postschool Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities. A Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2005.
- [25] J. White and J. Weiner, Influence of least restrictive environment and community based training on integrated employment

- outcomes for transitioning students with severe disabilities, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **21** (2004), 149–156.
- [26] M. Will, OSERS programming for the transition of youth with disabilities: Bridges from school to working life. Washington, DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education, 1984.
- [27] S. Willis, The relationship of social cognitive variables to outcomes among young adults with emotional disturbance. Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, 2002.
- [28] D. Wittenburg and P. Loprest, Early transition experiences of transition-age child SSI recipients: New evidence from the National Survey of Children and Families, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* **18**(3) (2007), 176–187.