Exploring the Roles of Centers for Independent Living in the Transition Service Delivery System

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As one of the latest Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) Program grants, Pathways to Partnerships (84.421E) is poised to make a big impact in the world of transition service delivery for youth with disabilities. 84.421E is a discretionary spending initiative of the US Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Through this initiative, 20 states across the country were awarded five-year grants that began in October 2023 to engage in partnership development that supports children and youth with disabilities in their pursuit of competitive integrated employment (CIE). The purpose of this brief is to discuss the role of Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and their place in the transition service delivery system.

In October 2023, 20 states embarked on model demonstration projects to increase the engagement of youth with disabilities in competitive integrated employment (CIE). These state grantees are being funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) through the latest Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) initiative known as Pathways to Partnerships (84.421E). As the name suggests, these 20 states are working to improve systemic capacity through agency partnerships. Increasing CIE through interagency collaboration is, on its own, not a particularly novel endeavor. The 84.421E grantees, however, were required to provide a plan that leverages a partnership with Centers for Independent Living (CILs), an agency that has been historically underutilized in transition service delivery systems.

In a recent national survey of 562 CIL and special education professionals, Plotner and colleagues (2022) found that more than 80% of respondents reported collaboration between CILs and schools to support youth with disabilities in transition to be extremely important. The vast majority of those surveyed, however, reported weak or no collaboration with one another. In the places where collaborative transition service delivery that includes CILs is occurring, however, these disability-led, consumer-driven organizations are providing tremendous value to the students they support (Plotner & Walters, 2022). While such CILs are engaged in the delivery of a host of youth transition services (e.g., work-based learning experiences), it is important to understand CILs through more than just their role as the provider of specific services.

The Dynamic Role of CILs

In addition to providing youth transition services, CILs operate under a federal mandate to serve as advocates for disability issues (Administration for Community Living (ACL), 2024). In fact, the majority of their staff and board members are required to be people with disabilities. These disability-led organizations are charged with filling a unique role within the transition service delivery system (Walters & Allison, 2024a). One place in which this balance of disability-led advocacy and service provision is most evident is in the value-based principles that guide the CIL approach to youth transition services. Plotner and Walters (2022), identified five key value-based principles that drive CILs' support of youth with disabilities in transition. These principles include (1) an emphasis on youth empowerment, autonomy, and independence; (2) a strengths-based and goal-driven approach; (3) being youth-led and individualized; (4) peer-based and disability-pride-driven focus; and (5) readily available and accessible services.

Although collaboration with CILs in transition service delivery may not yet be a widespread practice, there are CILs around the country that are filling unique and important roles to support students (Plotner & Walters, 2022). The value-based principles that drive their practice and programmatic approach for youth with disabilities greatly influence their function in the transition service delivery system. The purpose of this brief is to explore some of the dynamic roles that CILs are playing in the transition service delivery system and their perspectives on

those roles. Staff from two CILs, Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living (LVCIL) and Able South Carolina, have highlighted some of the unique ways they are providing transition services.

CILs as Mentors and Peer-to-Peer Service Providers

The team at the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living (LVCIL) in Allentown, PA is not new to the transition service delivery system. They have been actively engaged in serving people with disabilities of all ages for more than 30 years. LVCIL prides themselves on their local impact, but their footprint expands far beyond their catchment area to reach youth with disabilities nationwide. CILs are mandated to provide core services to people with disabilities of all ages. Specific to youth transition and employment, LVCIL also partners with multiple agencies to provide job exploration, development and placement, and coaching.

Like other CILs, LVCIL operates through the lens of the Independent Living (IL) philosophy which views one's environment, not their disability, as the primary barrier to inclusion. Moreover, staff of CILs like LVCIL are active members of the disability community they are tasked with serving. A natural byproduct of providing youth transition programs and services that are facilitated by LVCIL staff members with disabilities, especially young adult staff members with disabilities, is the peer-to-peer approach in service delivery. This approach offers a natural foundation for LVCIL staff to act as mentors to the youth they support in both purposeful and organic ways. For many youth with disabilities, their experience with a CIL like LVCIL may be their first exposure to the IL philosophy and people who identify as members of the disability community. There can be a revolutionary transformation experienced by youth when exposed to service provision driven by disability pride and self-determination. For many, being empowered by an organization like LVCIL to set and achieve meaningful goals can be what helps start them on a path to a life-changing degree of independence that leads to CIE.

LVCIL looks to the youth they are supporting to shape the services they provide, which sets them and other CILs apart in the delivery of transition services. Integral to their approach is the role that peer mentorship plays in how LVCIL serves transition-age youth. To combat the potentially limited number of mentors available to youth with disabilities, CILs have the unique

ability to tap into their own staff, who are largely disabled, to provide lived experience-driven content to the youth they are serving. While some may envision peer mentoring in a one-to-one format, LVCIL has found that holding peer groups where transition-age youth can come together in a safe, supportive environment enables more people to access peer mentoring or peer support. Providing a platform for youth to discuss the challenges or successes they are experiencing in the transition process can be hugely beneficial for both mentors and mentees. Moreover, mentoring offers a chance for youth to learn and gain life skills with the support of someone who can relate to them based on their own lived experience. A mentoring group creates an organic process for one-to-one mentoring matches to be made as youth decide to pursue them and this combination of group and individual peer mentoring formats is used at multiple CILs. Ideally, a peer mentoring program establishes a clear path for mentees to eventually become mentors. In this way, peer mentoring experiences are provided for youth with disabilities in a way that is self-sustaining over time.

CILs as Experts and Trainers

Able South Carolina (Able SC), housed in Columbia and Greenville, SC, has been active in the transition service delivery system for more than 30 years. Like LVCIL, Able SC is connected with youth transition initiatives locally, regionally, statewide, and nationally to promote independence, community integration, and accessibility for youth with disabilities. Attitudinal, architectural, and programmatic barriers bombard youth with disabilities daily. CIL staff have often personally navigated similar barriers in their own transition to adulthood. Such experiences mean that Able SC staff are poised to provide expertise built upon both lived experience and professional knowledge of best practices. While their expertise means that Able SC staff are well positioned to provide direct services and programming to youth with disabilities, it also has some important implications for impacting the larger transition service delivery system.

CIL staff, like those at Able SC, have firsthand knowledge of the implications of training, policies, and procedures that lack the social validity that comes only from lived experience. As a result, they are personally invested in providing exemplary training and expertise to those

seeking their guidance. Able SC provides agency partners, schools, and community members with distinctive training that is rooted in the lived experience of the disability community. For example, through a grant from the South Carolina State Department of Education, Able SC provides disability-led technical assistance and training to qualifying schools upon request. Their unique training approach is specifically tailored to the audience's needs but generally falls into one of three categories: (1) disability awareness and etiquette, (2) effective transition services, and (3) building peer mentoring programs.

Disability awareness and etiquette provides a comprehensive introduction to disability history and the influence of policies on education, employment, and community services, as well as contemporary approaches to engaging with the disability community through a disability justice lens. Effective transition services training focuses on instructing schools on how to structure programs and classrooms in a way that best serves all students, including those with disabilities, and supporting them in their transition goals. Training in building peer mentoring programs reviews data and testimonials that underscore the effectiveness of peer mentoring and salient features of Able SC's peer mentoring program's history and development. Such training examples demonstrate how CILs like Able SC are leveraging the unique lens of independent living philosophy and lived experience to influence their communities for the better. Utilizing CILs as a source for training to schools, agencies, and other community organizations strengthens the transition service delivery system to better meet the needs of youth with disabilities as they prepare for their transition to adulthood.

Conclusion

While scholars have pointed to the many potential benefits CILs may offer for transition-age youth with disabilities (Mann & Wang, 2021; Plotner & Walters, 2022; Walters & Plotner, 2023; Wehmeyer & Gragoudas, 2004), research indicates that CILs have historically been an infrequent partner in interagency transition collaboration (Plotner et al., 2022). As a required partner on the recently funded 84.421E model demonstrations involving improved collaboration and service coordination, many states are likely striving to determine how to best build collaborative partnerships with CILs. One way to facilitate collaboration across agencies that provides a nuanced view of CIL capacity in a given state is through community resource mapping (Walters & Allison, 2024b). Rather than boxing CILs into a single, static role as the provider of a specific transition service, it would be beneficial for 84.421E states to consider the breadth of dynamic and integral roles that CILs can, and should, play in the transition service delivery system.

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