Setting the Stage for Pathways to Partnerships: Engaging with Centers for Independent Living through Community Resource Mapping

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Background

In the fall of 2023, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) made history by announcing their largest-ever amount of discretionary spending for model demonstration grants through the Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) Program. This particular DIF initiative, Pathways to Partnerships (P2P, 84.421E), invited states to propose projects detailing innovative strategies for increasing competitive integrated employment (CIE) for youth with disabilities through increased collaboration and service coordination among state vocational rehabilitation agencies (SVRA), state education agencies, and Centers for Independent Living (CILs). In total, model demonstrations were funded in 20 states: Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont, and Wyoming.

A challenging aspect of these model demonstrations may be the meaningful integration of CIL – a partner historically underutilized in the delivery of transition services. CILs have long supported the independence of their consumers through individual and systems advocacy, independent living skills training, information and referral, peer support, and more (Administration for Community Living, 2023). Despite their vital place in adult disability service delivery and a longstanding mandate to serve people of all ages, CILs may be noticeably absent from partnerships supporting transition-age youth with disabilities. The 84.421E model demonstration will help states create a foundation for meaningful and lasting partnerships with these unique, value-driven, and disability-led organizations through community resource mapping.

CILs and Youth Transition

The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) brought major changes to the way publicly-funded agencies support youth with disabilities achieve CIE. One such change was the addition of youth transition services to the core services of CILs. While scholars have pointed to the benefits CILs offer for transition-age youth with disabilities (Mann & Wang, 2021; Plotner & Walters, 2022; Walters & Plotner, 2023; Wehmeyer & Gragoudas, 2004), research indicates that CILs have not historically been active partners in collaborative initiatives with VR and education agencies for the delivery of transition services, highlighting the lack of awareness within these agencies regarding effective engagement strategies (Plotner et al., 2022). The 84.421E DIF model demonstrations underscore the necessity of CILs as mandated partners. It is probable that many states are currently navigating the challenge of establishing optimal collaborative partnerships with CILs to effectively implement the model demonstrations. An approach that merits consideration is community resource mapping. This brief aims to assist states in establishing meaningful and enduring partnerships with CILs highlighting the process to map and coordinate the delivery of transition services.

Community Resource Mapping

At its simplest, community resource mapping is “a strategy for promoting interagency collaboration by better aligning programs and services for youth and families” (Crane & Mooney, 2005, p. 1). Resource mapping helps teams document what is currently being done and how it may be leveraged within a results-oriented approach to promoting positive postschool outcomes like CIE (Crane et al., 2023). Some common ambitions of resource mapping include (a) gaining detailed information about relevant organizations, (b) identifying barriers and facilitators for meeting the needs of transition-age youth, and (c) leveraging this information into clear and cohesive policy recommendations to support collaboration (Crane et al., 2023). While community resource mapping can be conducted in many ways, a two-phase approach has been outlined here to promote clarity and constructive action within P2P (84.421E) model demonstration projects to better engage CILs in the coordination and delivery of transition services for youth with disabilities.

Phase 1: Understanding CILs through Public Data

One strategy to gain in-depth knowledge and address potential challenges in partnering with CILs is to examine publicly available data from their annual performance reports submitted to the Administration on Community Living (ACL). The ACL makes aggregated Program Performance Reports (PPR) data, spanning the last seven years up to the fiscal year 2021-2022 (FY21), accessible on their website: https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living (see “Annual Performance Data and Outcomes”). This information, presented in Excel spreadsheet files, requires no advanced data analysis skills, and can be utilized to learn about the overall scope and impact CILs. More specifically, the information gained from CIL PPR data can support community resource mapping efforts, providing insights to contextualize collaborative partnerships with CILs.

Gathering National CIL Insights

Before exploring CIL PPR data within a single state, it is helpful to explore national trends for CILs. For example, using the PPR data for FY21, find “Net Operating Resources” in the first tab. Sorting the spreadsheet with this column will allow you to visually inspect the range of budgets and find the lowest and highest budgets in FY21. The final row of column V shows the total of net operating budgets for CILs. In that same cell, you can edit the formula providing that total to find other statistics about CIL net operating budgets in FY21. Double clicking on the cell and replacing “SUM” with “MEDIAN” provides a median net operating budget, a figure more useful than the average given the pockets of CILs with tremendously large budgets. From this we learn that, in FY21, the median net operating budget of CILs was $903,675. A similar process

can be repeated with other data fields. For example, by doing the same with a column in the third tab called “Number of Consumers Served During the Reporting Year: Total number of consumers served,” we learn that CILs served a median of 370 consumers in FY21.

Other types of CIL data at the national level may provide highly worthwhile points of comparison. For consumer demographic information like age, disability category, and contains the formula “SUM,” providing totals for all the consumers reported within a given subgroup. There are many ways to use this information, but the simplest may be to calculate each subgroup as a percentage of total consumers served to gather insights about consumer service makeup. For example, dividing the total number of consumers from each age subgroup by the total consumers for all age subgroups yields a percentage, as shown in *Figure 1*. From such insights, we can make reasonable conclusions about CIL trends across the country (e.g., less than 15% of CIL consumers were youth with disabilities in FY21). Such insights can provide important points of comparison for individual CILs and CILs within a single state.

Figure 1. Calculating Consumer Age Group %

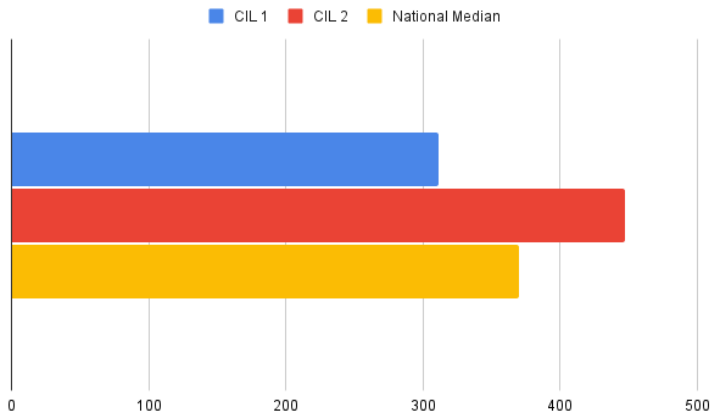
245,024 total consumers reported

Under 5: 1,654 / 245,024 = **1%**
5 to 19: 21,421 / 245,024 = **9%**
20 to 24: 13,275 / 245,024 = **5%**
25 to 59: 100,080 / 245,024 = **41%**
Over 59: 106,993 / 245,024 = **44%**
Age Unavailable: 1,601 / 245,024 = **<1%**

Gathering State Level CIL Insights.

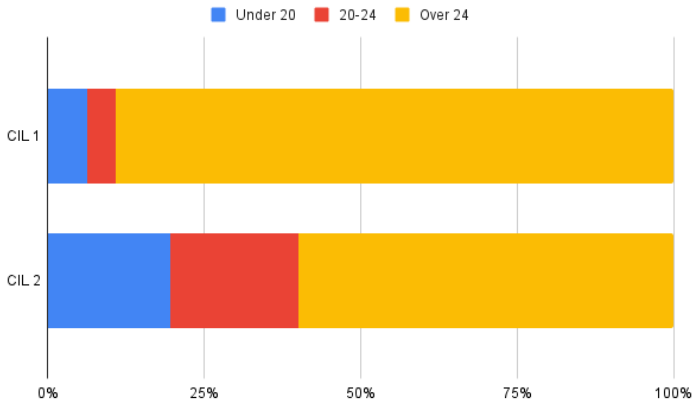
Using CIL PPR data to learn about trends at the state level is an even simpler undertaking. By deleting or hiding rows for CILs in all other states, tabs in a PPR data file are made much more manageable to this end. With the focus on CILs in a single state, it may be helpful to create charts or graphs to show how these CILs compare with national trends. For example, *Figure 2* displays side by side consumer totals for three CILs alongside the national median consumer total in FY21.

Figure 2. State CIL Consumers in FY21



By including the national median of consumers served by CILs in FY21, Figure 2 makes it easy to see which CILs are serving more, less, or about the same number of consumers as CILs throughout the country tended to serve during that same time. There are a large number of insights you may choose to gather about CILs in your state. Some of these insights may not need to be contextualized by national data. *Figure 3*, for instance, provides an example of collecting information about the ages of consumers for two fictious CILs in a single state. Totals for some age categories have been added together for both CILs to provide a view of youth, young adult, and older adult consumers. From a visual such as this one, we can see that older adults represent the majority of CIL consumers in that state and that CIL 2 tended to serve significantly more youth consumers in a single year than CIL 1. Once such PPR insights about CILs at the state level have been gathered, it is important to consider how to best communicate these findings. A slide deck can be a helpful tool for organizing both text and visuals into a format that is easily understood. With such insights organized in a meaningful way, it may be worthwhile to consider ways to engage professional partners more broadly in community resource mapping.

Figure 3. State CIL Consumers by Age Group



Phase 2: Engaging Partners

As outlined in the initial phase, a data-driven approach to understand how CILs are actively serving transition-age youth can establish a foundation for community resource mapping. This foundation paves the way for nuanced strategic planning conversations and helps to highlight the unique strengths and resources CILs bring to the delivery of transition services that support CIE. Once key partners have a better understanding of CIL resource, the community resource mapping process shifts to a dialogue-based approach. In simple terms, if key project personnel want to know how to best support CILs in engaging with their model demonstration collaboratively, there is no substitute for asking them how best to do so.

For states with the resources to approach this dialogue systematically, the community resource mapping process may use interviews or focus groups with CIL professionals (e.g., CIL directors, staff, or board members; leadership from the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC); or state CIL association) to engage with findings from the CIL PPR review. Findings from these interviews may be formally packaged together with findings from the PPR review to provide a more comprehensive depiction of CIL services and impact.

For others, a dialogue-based continuation of the community resource mapping process may be less formal. Key personnel involved with a state's P2P model demonstration project may convene to share and discuss findings from the PPR review. To add value to this process, project personnel may elect to engage in some sort of collaborative evaluation-driven discussion (e.g., SOAR analysis to document CIL strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results). The ideal attendance for such meetings may vary depending on the social dynamics involved between project partners in a given state.

More to the point of project needs, key project personnel may also choose to work with CIL partners to map their role in the project using a flow of services (Crane et al., 2018). A flow of services may help to frame conversation about the student outcomes that CILs can influence and the services they may provide to these ends. Regardless of how project personnel choose to engage in dialogue to continue the community resource mapping process with CILs, it is important to ensure clear outputs are produced to document the process along the way. Such outputs may not necessarily take the form of a written report or a formal presentation, but it is advisable to produce transparent products to promote good faith among prospective CIL partners.

Using Community Resource Mapping to Promote Collaboration with CILs

As the P2P model demonstration projects get underway, states need to leverage the capacity of CILs to deliver coordinated transition services. For successful collaboration with CILs to take place, however, conceptual collaboration will need to be practically operationalized. Community resource mapping is one way to provide structure to such collaborative efforts.

Reviewing CIL PPR data is an undertaking that any state can use to provide clarity on the impact and services of CILs. Using such data can serve as the first step toward a more nuanced and dialogue-driven approach, facilitating the mapping of CILs resources and their role in the transition services system. Through formal or semi-formal processes with key P2P project personnel, the community resource mapping process itself becomes a collaborative exercise. Whether the community resource mapping process is used to produce a strength-based strategic plan (e.g., SOAR) or a more targeted output like a flow of services to clarify the roles of CILs in a state P2P project, it is important to document this phase of the mapping process for clarity and transparency among partners.

To be clear, community resource mapping itself will not address all challenges to effectively collaborating with CILs. In many states, CILs are seen more as advocacy organizations than pioneers in transition service delivery. Attitudinal barriers from prospective project partners may need to be addressed directly. Additionally, by their very nature, CILs operate autonomously from one another within states. The strengths and needs of one CIL likely will be different than those of another. Committing to building the capacity of CILs as important and valued project partners is an undertaking that states should consider to foster equity in collaborative engagement. Finally, while community resource mapping sets a positive tone for collaboration, it should be followed up with continuous and structured communication. As personnel from P2P projects around the country face such challenges head on, their creative solutions and approaches that prove effective stand to benefit the field at large for years to come.

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