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The Youth Transition Demonstration: Interim Findings and Lessons for Program Implementation

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The transition to adulthood for youth with disabilities can be especially difficult. In addition to the host of issues facing all transition-age youth, young people with disabilities face unique issues related to health, social isolation, service and support needs, and potential loss of benefits. These challenges complicate their planning for future education and work, and often lead to poor employment outcomes, a high risk of dependency on public programs, and a lifetime of poverty (Davies, Rupp, and Wittenburg 2009).

The public cost of dependence on disability benefits by young people is quite large. In December 2009, 1,066,000 youth 13 to 25 years old were receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits totaling nearly $7.5 billion in 2009 (Social Security Administration 2010). An additional 196,000 individuals age 25 and under were receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (DI) benefits with an aggregate value in excess of $1 billion in 2009 (Social Security Administration 2011). Many others are at high risk of receiving SSI or DI in the future if they do not transition to productive adult lives. Some of these young people have disabilities that are currently not severe but have a prognosis for decreased functioning over time. Others are currently ineligible for benefits because of their parents' incomes but might be eligible after reaching age 18, especially if they were to move out of their parents' households.

The Youth Transition Demonstration

Recognizing the importance of service intervention at this critical juncture in the lives of young people with disabilities, the Social Security Administration (SSA) initiated the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD). Focusing on youth who are 14 to 25 years old, SSA is investing considerable resources in developing and evaluating strategies to help youth with disabilities become as economically self-sufficient as possible. YTD projects around the country offer transition services that are intended to lift the barriers facing youth with disabilities. YTD also includes SSA waivers of disability program rules that encourage youth to work by allowing them to retain more of their benefits as their earnings increase.

YTD is being evaluated based on an experimental design. Under this design, youth were randomly assigned to either a treatment group that is eligible for both the waivers and YTD services or to a control group that is under standard SSA program rules and may receive only those non-YTD services that happen to be available in their communities. Because of random assignment, the two groups were expected to be equivalent at baseline; consequently, any observed differences in outcomes between them can be attributed to the initiative. The evaluation is tracking employment, earnings, and benefits, among other outcomes, to assess whether YTD helps youth find jobs and reduces their dependency on SSI and DI. The evaluation also includes a study of the implementation of the YTD.

Intervention Components

Because SSA wants to test strong interventions grounded in best practices, the YTD components are based on *Guideposts for Success*, developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Y 2005). Guideposts was informed by a review of research, demonstration projects, and effective practices covering a range of programs. It represents the most comprehensive information available on "what works" in promoting a successful transition to adult life for youth with disabilities.

INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

- Individualized work-based experiences
- Youth empowerment
- Family involvement
- System linkages
- SSA waivers and benefits counseling

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Foremost among the intervention components are *individualized work-based experiences*. These include volunteer work, subsidized jobs, and, most notably, competitive paid employment in integrated settings where individuals with disabilities work alongside able-bodied individuals. The literature identifies competitive paid employment in secondary school as the strongest predictor of post school employment success (Benz, Yovanoff, and Doren 1997; Luecking and Fabian 2000). *Youth empowerment* refers to the acquisition of the skills and knowledge that allow youth to chart their own courses and advocate for themselves. In the context of YTD, empowerment is fostered primarily by engaging youth in person-centered planning that focuses on education, employment, health care, and independent living. *Family involvement* is important because of the critical role that families play in helping youth to manage their disability benefits and formulate plans for employment. The intervention fosters this involvement through family-focused training activities, support for parent networking, and the provision of transition-related information. YTD also facilitates the *system linkages* that youth may need to access health services, education programs, transportation assistance, and accommodations for education and employment.

SSA's waivers for YTD and the benefits counseling that youth need to understand them are also central to the intervention because they enhance five standard SSI work incentives that allow beneficiaries to retain some of their benefits while working. For example, under the waivers, the SSI earned income exclusion is $65 per month plus three-quarters of any additional earnings, whereas under standard rules this exclusion is $65 plus one-half of additional earnings (SSA 2011). Also under the waivers, the consequences of a negative continuing disability review or age 18 medical redetermination are delayed for youth enrolled in YTD, thus allowing them to continue to receive cash and medical benefits for four years after enrollment or until they reach age 22, whichever comes later. Finally, the waivers expand eligibility for three additional work incentives for SSI beneficiaries: the plan for achieving self-support, individual development accounts, and the student earned income exclusion.

YTD project staff typically deliver services directly to participating youth and their families. This approach contrasts with a case management model, in which project staff help participants to access services provided by other organizations. Project staff engage youth in person-centered planning, provide job development and job placement services, foster family support for transition efforts, and counsel youth and their families on issues surrounding SSA benefits. On the orther hand, project staff typically refer youth to other organizations for health and education services.

Another noteworthy feature of the YTD design is the technical assistance that was provided to projects. TransCen, Inc., a leader in the design and implementation of employment interventions for youth with disabilities, delivered assistance focused largely on helping project staff network with employers to identify paid competitive jobs and match youth with appropriate jobs.

YTD Projects

SSA signed cooperative agreements with seven organizations in September 2003 to operate YTD projects in California, Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, and New York (one in Bronx County and the other in Erie County). Two years later, SSA selected a team of contractors headed by Mathematica to conduct the random assignment evaluation and to provide technical assistance to the projects. The team also includes MDRC, a nonprofit corporation that evaluates social welfare programs, and TransCen. Based on information gathered through visits to the seven projects, the contractors recommended that those in the Bronx, Colorado, and Erie County participate in the first phase of the evaluation. SSA accepted this recommendation, and youth began to enroll in the evaluation in Colorado and the Bronx in August 2006, and in Erie County in February 2007. The top panel in Table 1 provides basic information about these projects. YTD project services ended in the fall of 2009 in Colorado and Erie County and in the spring of 2010 in the Bronx.

Three additional projects participated in phase two of the evaluation. They were selected from a group of five projects that were funded by SSA through its contract with Mathematica to deliver YTD services on a pilot basis in 2007. The selection criteria included the achievement of youth recruitment targets, the strength of services delivered and their fidelity to the intervention design, and the size of the target population. The projects selected to fully implement their YTD interventions are located in Miami-Dade County, Florida; Montgomery County, Maryland; and 19 counties in West Virginia. Youth in these locations began to enroll in the evaluation in March 2008, and the projects are scheduled to end in March 2012. The bottom panel in Table 1 provides basic information about these projects.

Enrollment of Youth in the Evaluation and YTD Services

In all of the evaluation sites except Montgomery County, enrollment in the evaluation was restricted to youth who were SSI or DI beneficiaries. In these sites, Mathematica survey interviewers conducted extensive outreach to youth on the disability benefit rolls to enroll them in the study. A young person was considered to have been enrolled upon completing a baseline interview and returning to Mathematica a signed informed consent form affirming his or her decision to participate in the evaluation. Emancipated youth could sign the consent form themselves; otherwise, a signature by a legal guardian was required. Following enrollment in the evaluation, Mathematica randomly assigned youth to a treatment or a control group.

Only in Montgomery County was eligibility for the evaluation restricted to youth who had been classified by the county's public school system as having severe emotional disturbances or who were known to have been diagnosed with a significant mental illness. Approximately 15 percent of them were receiv-

Table 1.

PROJECTS PARTICIPATING IN THE YTD EVALUATION

Project Location and Name	Lead Agency	Target Population	Sample Size	
			Treatment Cases (YTD Participants)	Control Cases
Phase-One Projects				
Bronx County, NY: *CUNY Youth Transition Demonstration Project*	John F. Kennedy, Jr. Institute for Worker Education of the City University of New York	SSI and DI beneficiaries ages 15-19 and their families	492 (387)	397
Colorado (4 counties): *Colorado Youth WINS*	Colorado WIN Partners of the University of Colorado Denver	SSI and DI beneficiaries ages 14-25	468 (401)	387
Erie Co., NY: *Transition WORKS*	Erie 1 Board of Cooperative Educational Services	SSI and DI beneficiaries ages 16-25	459 (380)	384
Phase-Two Projects				
Miami-Dade Co., FL: *Broadened Horizons, Brighter Futures*	Abilities, Inc. of Florida	SSI and DI beneficiaries ages 16-22	460 (388)	399
Montgomery Co., MD: Career *Transition Program*	St. Luke's House, Inc.	High school juniors or seniors with severe emotional disturbances	422 (374)	383
West Virginia (19 counties): *West Virginia Youth Works*	Human Resources Development Foundation, Inc.	SSI and DI beneficiaries ages 15-25	455 (388)	397

Note: Martinez et al. (2008) provide full descriptions of the six projects participating in the YTD evaluation.

ing disability benefits; the others were considered to be at high risk of receiving benefits in the future, absent effective intervention. For youth who met these criteria, project staff conducted the initial outreach, primarily through presentations to students in high school transition classes. Mathematica then followed up with the youth to complete the baseline interview, obtain written informed consent, and randomly assign them to a treatment group or to a control group.

Mathematica attempted to contact 21,774 youth in the 5 sites in which recruitment was based on the SSA disability rolls. Twenty percent of these youth (4,298) enrolled in the evaluation and were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. The staff of the respective YTD projects convinced 1,944 of the 2,334 treatment group members (83 percent) to participate in their interventions.

In Montgomery County, 930 youth consented to participate in the evaluation. Of these, 805 completed the baseline survey and were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. The project staff convinced 374 of the 422 treatment group members (89 percent) to participate in the intervention.

Data Sources

The YTD evaluation includes an analysis of the implementation of the demonstration projects and an analysis of their impacts on employment and related outcomes. The implementation analysis relies primarily on qualitative data collected during three visits to the projects by the evaluation team over a period of two years. In addition, Efforts-to-Outcomes (ETO), the web-based management information system used by the YTD projects, is the source of quantitative data on service delivery.

The impact analysis is based on data from surveys of enrollees and administrative files for SSA benefit programs. In addition to the baseline survey, Mathematica is conducting follow-up surveys one and three years after youth entered the evaluation, gathering information on service receipt, educational attainment, employment and earnings, attitudes and expectations, and other outcomes. Administrative data on evaluation enrollees include monthly disability benefit amounts and the use of SSA work incentives.

Interim Findings from Phase-One Projects

The YTD evaluation team is preparing six project-specific reports that present interim findings from the process and impact analyses. Interim reports on the phase-one projects are already available at http://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/interimreports.html. Interim reports on the phase-two projects are scheduled to be released late in 2012. These reports are based on the full data for the implementation analysis and on one year of follow-up survey data and administrative data for the impact analysis. Key findings for the Colorado project and for the Bronx and Erie county projects are summarized below.

For each phase-one project, approximately two-thirds of the treatment group youth used some type of employment service, from either YTD or other programs, during the 12 months after they enrolled in the evaluation, as shown in the first row of Table 2. This finding reflects impacts, relative to what these youth would have experienced in the absence of YTD, ranging from 12.4 percentage points in Colorado to 16.2 percentage points in the Bronx. Notwithstanding these positive impacts, the intensity of YTD employment services was low in two of the projects. Our analysis of ETO data found that the average amount of YTD employment services received by participants in the Colorado and Erie projects who had actually used any such services was just 4.0 hours and 5.8 hours, respectively. Youth in the Bronx project received substantially more YTD employment services, averaging 20.2 hours.

Given the low intensity of YTD employment services received by participants in

the Colorado and Erie projects, it is not surprising that these projects had no statistically significant impacts on the proportion of youth who were employed in a paid job at some point during the year following random assignment (Table 2, row 2). The project in the Bronx, which provided more intense employment services that included direct placement in paid summer jobs, had a significant positive impact on employment of 9 percentage points. These results suggest that the SSA waivers for YTD may need to be combined with intense employment services in order to affect short-term employment outcomes.

Two of the phase-one projects had positive impacts on the use of SSA work incentives. The final row in Table 2 shows that the projects in the Bronx and in Erie County had statistically significant impacts of 9.3 and 6.9 percentage points, respectively, on the use of any work incentive during the year following enrollment in the evaluation. It is likely that the SSA waivers for YTD contributed to these impacts, but the evaluation design does not allow the impacts of the waivers to be disentangled from the impacts of YTD services. The Colorado project had no significant impact on the use of SSA work incentives.

Table 2

SELECTED ONE-YEAR IMPACTS OF THE PHASE-ONE YTD PROJECTS (PERCENTAGES)

	Bronx County, NY		Colorado		Erie County, NY	
Outcome Measure	Treatment Mean	Impact	Treatment Mean	Impact	Treatment Mean	Impact
Used any employment service	68.0	16.2***	61.7	12.4***	66.3	13.7***
Employed in a paid job	30.5	9.0***	34.4	1.3	43.6	2.9
Used any SSA work incentive	16.5	9.3***	24.5	1.9	31.7	6.9**

Note: A regression model was used to estimate impacts while controlling for baseline differences between treatment and control group members.

*/**/***Impact estimate is significantly different from zero at the .10/.05/.01 level using a two-tailed t-test.

Implications of Findings for Phase-Two Projects

Refinements to the technical assistance provided to the phase-two projects were prompted by the finding that the two phase-one projects that provided participating youth with few hours of employment services had no impacts on paid employment during the initial post-enrollment year. TransCen's technical assistance for all projects had concentrated on employment services and the achievement of positive employment outcomes. However, the interim findings for the phase-one projects revealed a need not only to sharpen the focus of the technical assistance on services directly linked to paid employment but also to closely monitor both the delivery of these services by project staff and the employment outcomes of project participants.

While services such as resolving issues with SSA benefits and facilitating enrollment in education programs may promote the well-being of YTD participants, TransCen reiterated to the staff of the phase-two projects that the YTD initiative is about competitive paid employment and self-sufficiency. Accordingly, TransCen advised the projects to emphasize *job development*—reaching out to employers to inform them about the YTD project and to identify employment opportunities for YTD participants—and *job placement*—working with youth to identify their skills and interests in order to match them with appropriate jobs. TransCen provided employment-focused technical assistance through workshops at annual conferences attended by all YTD project staff, repeated visits to each project to assist with job development and job placement, monthly webinars on topics pertaining to the delivery of employment services, and telephone consultation on employment issues concerning specific youth.

Empirical monitoring of employment-focused staff efforts and actual employment outcomes for YTD participants complements the sharpened focus of technical assistance on employment. Based on data that project staff enter into ETO, the evaluation team prepares monthly reports on services delivered by staff to YTD participants and on employment outcomes for these youth. The reports are discussed during monthly project-specific teleconferences with project directors and managers. Those discussions center on the intensity of employment services and on paid employment outcomes.

The refinements to YTD technical assistance were designed to increase the likelihood that the phase-two projects would provide the services envisioned for the YTD initiative—services focused on competitive paid employment. These refinements are likely to result in interventions that are stronger than those that were implemented by the phase-one projects and, thus, in stronger results.

References

For the full list of references, go to www.disabilitypolicyresearch.org/brief11_04_ref.asp.

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