



How Centers for Independent Living (CIL) can Promote Competitive, Integrated Employment: Developing Successful Strategic Partnerships

A Technical Resource for CILs

**Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center-2021-CIL-2
September 2021**

Introduction

CILs play an important role in promoting and advocating for competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. Not only can CILs provide employment-specific services to support individuals to achieve competitive, integrated employment (CIE), but they can also provide advocacy to help advance employment systems-change efforts. As the majority of CIL staff members are people with disabilities, they bring lived experience in understanding the employment barriers many individuals experience. Strong partnerships and collaboration with other agencies are key to breaking down employment barriers and improving outcomes for people with disabilities. This brief is designed to give you an overview of strategies to build partnerships with local and state agencies. While the strategies are not comprehensive, our goal is to provide you with a few key takeaways on how you can take the first step to build your employment program by collaborating with others.

Identify Key Partners Strategically

To increase collaboration, it is important to identify potential partners that you will need to leverage your work and accomplish your goals. To understand who you need to connect with, you first need to understand the relationships that may already exist within your CIL.

Completing an Inventory of Existing Partners

You can start with completing a staff inventory of partnerships and connections staff already have with different employment-focused agencies. Compile this information in a document. List the initiatives and activities that the CIL has engaged in with the partner, the staff at the partner organization who were engaged in each project, and the CIL liaison with the partnership for each activity or collaboration. It is also helpful to capture what resources or strengths each potential or target partner could bring to the table in terms of a collaboration around employment of people with disabilities. This activity provides the opportunity for all staff to be involved in this effort, and utilizing already established relationships will make sure your CIL is not duplicating efforts.



The following tool in Exhibit 1 is an example from a CIL that identified different partner organizations. They used the tool to specify initiatives, CIL staff liaisons, and opportunities for expanding partnerships.

Exhibit 1. Sample Partnership Inventory Matrix (with examples)

Partner Organization	Initiatives	Current/ Previous Initiative (Timeframe)	Partner Organizational Contacts in the Initiative	CIL Staff Liaison(s)	Opportunities for Expanding the Partnership	Strengths/Resources that the Partner could add to CIL's Employment Goals	Any Concerns or Challenges with the Partnership
Medicaid HCBS Waiver Program, Agency on Disabilities	Member of the DD Agency's Stakeholder Advisory Board	2016-2021	John Doe, Director of Employment & Day Services	Jane Doe, Director of Programs	YES! We'd like to get funding from the Agency on Disabilities to support waiver participants in attaining employment goals	Contractual funding, referrals for clients who need employment supports	We would need to become a licensed Medicaid HCBS provider; also, do not want to limit our advocacy work with the state.
Workforce System	We refer a lot of clients to the American Job Centers (AJCs)	Since 2015-present	Jack Dae, Executive Director, local AJC	Joy Dae, CIL Referral Services Specialist	YES! We would like to partner with them to drive more people into the Ticket to Work program	They are an EN, so they may be willing to share T2W incentives for their clients who are seeking a job, or if we refer jobseekers with disabilities to them.	They may be unwilling to share the incentive payments. AJC is also very large and bureaucratic.
Chamber of Commerce	Quarterly Business Disability Roundtable Events	Since 2018	Jessie Dei, Director of Membership & Training	Jackie Dei, Accessibility Education Specialist	YES! We would like to serve as a consultant to local businesses to refer jobseekers with disabilities and to advise employers on how to build more inclusive worksites.	Access to most of the businesses in the counties we serve. Funding for TA. Executive Director has a disability and has prioritized inclusive workplaces as his goal.	They may ask us to test/validate our training prior to hiring us, which could be expensive.

Identification of Unmet Resource Needs and New Partnership Targets

Once you have completed the inventory of your current or previous partnerships that could be relevant to developing or expanding your CIL's employment program, it is important to identify resources you need that you do not currently possess and brainstorm potential partners who can help address these gaps.

It is important to note that there is such a thing as being too insular (i.e., not having enough partners nor an open, transparent approach to collaboration), and in being too inviting (i.e., having so many partners that there is a lack of clear, distinct roles and contributions for each partner to make that feeds into a larger mutually agreed upon strategic goal). So, it is important during these assessment activities to be strategic and thoughtful about which partners you may prioritize engaging in a project or initiative over others. The following tool provides an example of how to



tier your partnership targets based on anticipated alignment in resources and addressing unmet needs.

The following tool in Exhibit 2 is an example from a CIL that identified funding and access to employers as gaps to address. They used the tool to specify the need and identify potential partners in their community.

Exhibit 2. Resource Mapping (with examples)

Resource Need/Gap	Specific Need	Potential Partner	Contact within Potential Partner Organization	Opportunities for Partnering	Strengths/Resources that the Partner could add to CIL's Employment Goals	Any Concerns or Challenges with the Partnership
Funding	We need seed funding to help pay for our provision of transition services to youth with disabilities.	State VR Agency	Jane Doe, Director of Programs	CIL could become a contractor to receive funding from VR to offer pre-Employment Training Services (pre-ETS) to youth and young adults with disabilities	Contractual funding and referral of clients to us.	We want to make sure that accepting a contract will not impede our ability to continue to advocate for people with disabilities and push back on VR when we have concerns about their policies or actions.
Access to Employers	We have what employers need (access to jobseekers with disabilities) but we don't always know how to let employers know about us or our clients	Chamber of Commerce	Josue Dague, Executive Director, Chamber of Commerce	Is there a way to partner with the Chamber to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities and simultaneously market our referral and employment support services?	The Chamber could provide access to most of the businesses in the counties we serve and credibility (i.e., help us get our foot in the door).	We don't know the Executive Director; however, we do know one of his direct reports from previous work, and we also are aware he has a disability and is very supportive of promoting more inclusive worksites among his member companies.

In Exhibit 3, we have provided a sample listing of agencies in that typically provide employment services or programs that may be potential partners to get you jump-started on your partnership development work.



Exhibit 3. List of Potential Partners for Supporting CIL Employment Initiatives



Consider Employment Supports and Services a CIL May Offer

Below are examples of ways a CIL may offer its expertise and guidance when partnering with agencies.

Advocacy

CILs have a responsibility to provide advocacy services, and employment advocacy is a significant need within the workforce system and economic mainstream. As organizations made up of people with disabilities, the voices of CILs are needed to combat stereotypes and biases and to pave a way for employment for all.

Individual Advocacy:

CILs can assist consumers with learning how to advocate for their rights in an employment setting. Examples include ensuring consumers understand their employment rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), role-playing how to professionally communicate with an employer or co-worker, providing education on reasonable accommodations, and discussing strategies to ask for a raise or promotion.

Systematic Advocacy

In addition to individual advocacy services, CILs can advocate on a systems level. You likely know the employment barriers consumers are facing in your state and local communities through your work with individual consumers. Providing that information to partners and offering potential solutions, in a respectful, collaborative way can be seen as



valuable to state partners that are working to improve employment systems. Here are some suggestions on how to get involved in systematic advocacy:

- Have staff who have experienced barriers with employment systems sit on boards, councils, coalitions, planning committees, focus groups, etc. to advocate for change. Examples include the Special Education Advisory Council or State Rehabilitation Council.
- Educate legislators on employment barriers faced by people with disabilities and develop strategies for overcoming barriers.
- Research best practices from other states regarding employment programs (e.g., utilizing Medicaid waivers for employment, braiding funding, innovative ways to access transportation for employment) to demonstrate the knowledge you bring to the conversation.

Trainings/Peer Support Groups

CILs can offer a variety of employment-focused training and peer support groups to consumers, as well as training to partnering agencies. Training and peer support groups to consumers can be on a variety of different topics such as preparing for employment, understanding your employment rights, navigating reasonable accommodations, disability disclosure, and interview preparation. Training to agencies can include an overview of the ADA, disability sensitivity and etiquette, evidence-based employment strategies, or simply an overview of CIL services that may help their clients.

Employment Services

Even though employment services are not a specific core service of a CIL, employment often paves the way for individuals with disabilities to lead an independent life and can fall under general independent living skills. As a CIL, we must consider offering individual employment services to encourage and promote employment as a realistic option for people with disabilities. Consider how these services may be offered individually and in group settings. Consider how you may offer these services to youth and adults. A sampling of the employment services a CIL can offer to consumers is listed below:

- Self-esteem and confidence building to prepare for employment
- Access to benefits counseling
- Career options counseling
- Job search skills (resumes, interviews)
- Workplace skill-building (communicating effectively, workplace etiquette, professional relationships, etc.)
- Job performance support



- Troubleshooting challenges in the workplace (including disclosure, accommodations, and advocacy)
- Peer support

Partnerships with Employers

When CILs partner with employers, it helps dispel negative biases and stereotypes around disability employment. By building these relationships, employers get the opportunity to interact with professionals with disabilities who are currently employed. There are many ways CILs can partner with employers to mutually benefit both parties. Below are just a few examples.

Trainings

CILs can offer a variety of different trainings to employers to educate them, help them think differently about people with disabilities, and provide resources. Examples of training topics include disability etiquette and sensitivity, accommodations made easy, employing and supervising inclusively, understanding disability, recruiting people with disabilities, creating accessible digital resources, and ADA architectural standards/barrier removal. These trainings can be offered through a fee-for-service model.

Accessibility Assessments

CILs can offer physical and digital accessibility assessment to employers. This ensures accessibility for not only the companies' present and future employees but also their consumer base. It is important to note that staff who provide accessibility assessments should be fully trained as an ADA coordinator and trained in Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Technical Assistance and Policy Review:

CILs can play an important role with offering technical assistance and policy review to employers. Often employers are looking for advice and guidance on how to effectively recruit people with disabilities and reasonable accommodations. CILs can lean on their personal and professional experience and aid employers in these areas.

Potential Avenues for Funding Employment Services

Below are examples of how other CILs have used partnerships to fund employment programs and services.

- Contracting with Vocational Rehabilitation to provide employment services to adults and/or Pre-Employment Transition Services to youth with disabilities.
- Becoming an Employment Network through Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program to receive outcome payments for individuals who receive



Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and go to work.

- Contracting with your local Department of Social Services to provide employment services to individuals through their SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Employment and Training program.
- Developing a fee for service model to offer trainings, accessibility assessments, and technical assistance to employers.
- Applying for state and local grants and initiatives with agencies such as your state Developmental Disabilities council, Department of Education, United Way, and AJC. Partnering with different agencies for existing grants in place can be an avenue for funding as well.

Summary

There are numerous ways that CILs can support individuals with disabilities to achieve maximum employment and economic advancement. Additionally, CILs can not only embed employment into their existing services but build or expand programming focused on offering employment-specific services to clients with disabilities. Strategic partnership development is critical to any successful employment program, and CILs should both assess their existing partners and identify other potential partners that could address unmet resource needs. Finally, there are numerous strategies that CILs have implemented to get started in the employment space, and the sky is the limit in terms of ways that CILs can become a vital leader in the employment of people with disabilities in their local communities and states.

