

Issue BRIEF

Kelli Crane, Sarah Palmer, and Todd Honeycutt

Youth Transition to Employment: Creating and Using a Community of Practice to Generate New Knowledge

IMPORTANCE OF CREATING A CoP

The use of a CoP can be a valuable way to:

Connect professionals from different geographic regions who have a common purpose and might not otherwise have opportunities to interact

Capture and share existing knowledge by providing a forum to identify solutions to common problems and a process to collect and evaluate information

Generate new knowledge from the technical input offered by professionals with varied experiences and perspectives

Enable dialogue between professionals who come together to explore new possibilities; solve challenging problems; and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities

Introduce a safe and collaborative online space for professionals to have a free flow of ideas and information

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, along with many other stakeholders, is working to improve outcomes for youth ages 14 to 24 who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or are at risk of receiving SSI. Mathematica Policy Research contributed to this effort—known as the SSI Youth Recipient and Employment Transition Formative Research project—in two ways. First, we identified promising programs and policies for youth with disabilities, including research questions for further study. Second, we uncovered testable interventions for helping these youth make the transition to sustained, gainful employment.

To accomplish these tasks, we established a Community of Practice (CoP) made up of over 70 of the nation's leading experts in youth transition, employment, and the Social Security Administration's disability programs. The CoP helped us identify research and policy options related to helping SSI youth find and keep jobs.

This brief describes successful strategies that can be used to solicit ideas and perspectives from a CoP. These strategies can be used by others who are interested in using a CoP to gather critical input on a given issue.

KEY FEATURES OF THE COP

A CoP can be an effective tool for bringing professionals together to solve problems, share knowledge, cultivate best practices, and foster innovations. One way to build and run a good CoP is to create an interactive and engaging experience that maximizes and personalizes the learning outcomes for all members.

Mathematica used its CoP to inform and build on the evidence base about promising initiatives that support better employment outcomes for youth SSI recipients. Our CoP had several key features:

- The project team **recruited CoP members** who could provide crucial insight and contribute to the base of knowledge about SSI recipients and the factors that influence their successful transition to gainful employment. Members of the CoP represented local, state, and federal policymakers; state and local service providers from employment, secondary and post-secondary education, and benefits management; health care; employers and industry associations; and researchers. The members were asked for a commitment to participate in five live meetings and actively engage in online discussion for one year.

- A **CoP moderator** managed the CoP and engaged members to elicit their input in a timely and efficient manner.
- Assigning members to **affinity groups** helped us to organize the discussions on specific issues relevant to youth SSI recipients. In each group, we identified one member to help the moderator facilitate the discussion within and outside the group. The five affinity groups focused on employment, education, system linkages, benefits counseling and finances, and health. Although we chose the members of each affinity group to ensure balance, CoP members did have the opportunity to join another group.
- An interactive **online platform** served as a virtual meeting space for members to collaborate with one another.
- **Monthly live meetings** set expectations for members around how and when to participate, thereby establishing a predictable rhythm for their involvement.
- Members completed **web-based surveys** after each meeting to provide additional insights on existing strategies, programs, efforts, definitions, and knowledge gaps related to the transition to employment for youth SSI recipients.
- **Resources** related to the secondary transition of youth SSI recipients were posted on the online platform for members to access (such as manuscripts, government reports, policy papers, and links to websites).
- Distribution of **meeting guides and summaries** before and after CoP meetings kept members informed of CoP activities. Before each meeting, members received a meeting guide, which included the agenda, learning goals, links to relevant research articles, and questions for reflection. The guide also provided room for members to record notes and reflections during that session's discussion. After each meeting, summaries were sent to all members. The meeting summaries compiled information from each affinity group's online discussion board, meeting transcripts, and meeting follow-up surveys.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

Mathematica established a CoP to inform the work of the SSI Youth Recipient project. The multidisciplinary nature of the CoP enabled us to gather diverse perspectives on “what works” for promoting the employment of youth SSI recipients, which we could then use to identify research and policy options. Moreover, our approach to managing the CoP offered members several ways to discuss their ideas (such as via an online collaborative site and live meetings).

We learned several lessons from this CoP experience:

- **Establishing affinity groups allowed for the effective management of both CoP members and their input.** Organizing the CoP members into smaller affinity groups helped us manage members’ input, ideas, and recommendations.
- **Affinity group facilitators helped engage CoP members.** The role of the facilitators was to support the content moderator in keeping members engaged in the live meetings and online discussions.
- **Choosing the right platform to accommodate meetings and webinars was essential.** CoP members lived all over the country, making face-to-face meetings infeasible. It was therefore paramount that we had an accessible, flexible, and powerful platform to bring members together for live meetings and webinars.
- **It was useful to account for variable member engagement.** Despite the large number of CoP members, only a small number participated at a relatively high level during the live meetings and online discussions. Other members assumed a more passive role but still added value through their involvement in other ways.

A CoP can share best practices and knowledge that in turn can help advance professional practice and change policy. The key features of Mathematica’s CoP and the lessons learned from the SSI Youth Recipient project can guide the organization and execution of similar efforts in the future.

For all materials related to this project, including full reports, other issue briefs, and webinars, please visit the project website at <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/projects/initiatives-to-improve-adult-outcomes-and-employment-opportunities-for-young-recipients-of-ssi>.

For more information, contact Todd Honeycutt, senior researcher, Mathematica Policy Research, at thoneycutt@mathematica-mpr.com.

This brief was prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Office of Disability Employment Policy, by Mathematica Policy Research under contract number DOLQ129633249. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. government.

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