Supporting Individuals Who Are Working

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, day and employment service providers have had to quickly determine how best to provide supports for people they serve. For many this means transitioning to services and supports that can be provided remotely. This brief is one in a series developed to help community providers continue to provide services to those who are currently working, seeking employment, or engaged in community-based day supports.

During this time, we are all learning how to best support the people we serve. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together to provide services that help people to continue to work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

ICI COVID-19 resources: covid19.communityinclusion.org

The core of supported employment is the ability to provide ongoing supports to individuals who are working, with staff often spending time at job sites whether to conduct observational check-ins, provide direct job coaching and training supports, facilitate natural supports with co-workers, and/or gather feedback from supervisors. As a result of COVID-19, onsite job visits and in-person meetings with individuals and their employers have been curtailed, and are not always necessarily possible or advisable. However, employment service providers can continue to provide quality employment supports, without the same level of direct physical access to individuals, workplaces, employers and other key team members. And a highly responsive level of supports to both individuals and employers is particularly important now, as a result of the pandemic's major impact on many work places. There are a wide range of new issues to be addressed, ranging from staying safe in the workplace, the impact of the pandemic on the work environment, and possibly the need to support individuals who are newly working from home.

Analyzing the current situation

For individuals working during the pandemic, employment services staff must analyze each person's situation, skills, support team, and preferences. Support and services must be offered that respect people's desire to continue working while giving the support and guidance needed to do so successfully. Analyze the dynamics of each situation and its impact and implications for those involved. These include the individual worker, the employer, and their supports at home. All these elements must be coordinated and supported to ensure ongoing employment success.

Providing Supports to the Individual

It remains crucial during this time to ensure individuals feel supported and are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and accommodations needed to continue to perform their job duties successfully, even with reduced availability of on-site job coaching.

Develop an individual support plan that addresses issues impacted by the pandemic. In developing this plan, consider the following:

▶ What types of supports does the individual need in general and specific to the pandemic?

▶ Can some or all of these supports be provided remotely?

▶ What technology is available for remote supports? (phone, video, computer, tablet, etc.)

Establish a routine check-in schedule with the individual, and ensure the individual knows how to reach you if they need assistance. Maximize the use of remote check-ins via phone-call, text, email, and/or videoconference, rather than in person. Work with individuals to determine which type(s) of technology to use for these check-ins, as choices may vary according to access, familiarity, and accessibility.

Teach and train individuals to use these methods for regular communication and check-ins. Family

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members, residential staff, and housemates can also assist individuals with choosing, learning, and using any new communication methods.

Counseling

More than ever, good employment counseling is essential. Set a tone in support of going to work, while stressing the importance to take all necessary precautions.

Employment counseling typically covers progress on the job, job satisfaction, dealing with supervisors and co-workers, and identifying areas for guidance. In addition to these standard areas, address the following during the pandemic:

▶ What specific job tasks and routines do you do? Are there ways they can be changed so you can work more safely?

▶ What is your workplace telling you about your job and the impact of COVID-19?

▶ Have your hours or tasks changed? If so, are the changes working so far?

▶ Do you still have the same supervisors and co-workers to support you? If some people are not there now, what are you doing to get support?

▶ What are the rules about how people stay safe and protected on the job during COVID-19? Do these rules help you feel safe at work?

▶ How are you getting to and from work? What changes have been made to keep you safe during that time?

▶ Are there other things your employer can be doing to keep you and others safe? If so, have you talked to them about this? Do you need support to have that conversation?

▶ What questions or concerns do you have about working?

▶ How are you feeling about the pandemic situation in general?

▶ Is your living situation (family, housemates, residential staff) supportive of you working?

Individuals need to maintain positive, professional rapport with their employers. Encourage them to communicate directly with their employers about their status, issues, and concerns.

Guidance on working safely

Personal protective equipment (PPE) is a requirement for many employees continuing to work during COVID-19. For those employees, employers typically provide PPE and other preventative tools, and have workplace guidelines to maintain cleanliness and safety of all employees.

Ensure that individuals are aware of safety measures/policy changes and guidelines in their workplaces as well as the PPE available and how to use it. Even if not absolutely required, encourage individuals to use PPE when working. Coordinate closely with family, residential, and other supports to reinforce safety reminders and demonstrate how to properly use and dispose of PPE.

Staying healthy and keeping others healthy

Individuals going to work, even with PPE, have more exposure to the coronavirus. Give them guidance and reminders, with reinforcement by their household, on any precautions to use when out and traveling in the community (during commuting, while at work, anytime individuals step outside of the house).

Also, work with the individual on things to do after getting home from work to keep themselves and other safe. This might mean immediately showering after work, putting work clothes in the wash, and washing or disposing of PPE. Give reminders about not going to work if they are not feeling well. There are a variety of plain language resources including videos, listed in the resource section at the end of this publication, that can be helpful in understanding necessary precautions.

Possible impact on employment status

While it is important for individuals to wear PPE and follow safety guidelines, the inability to do so could impact their employment status. During the pandemic, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, if the employer feels the individual poses a threat to themselves and others in ways that cannot be accommodated (e.g., the individual is unable to abide by safety guidelines), the employer can furlough or terminate the individual's employment.

With the individual's permission, keep in touch with their employer to check in about how the person is doing with the new safety rules. If issues come up, talk about them openly with the person, their household, and their employer. There may be solutions or workarounds that can help the person keep their job while keeping themselves and others safe.

Advocacy and accommodations

Guide and support individuals with advocating for their needs with their employers in terms of the pandemic. Ensure the individuals you work with know their rights including their rights to

accommodations in the workplace. Specific areas of advocacy may include:

▶ Safety and protection measures

▶ Job changes because of shifts in natural supports, availability of transportation impacting hours of availability, or other issues

▶ Reasonable accommodations. Examples include creating temporary barriers or one-way routes in the workplace to increase distancing; modifying duties to limit movement and exposure; creating modified work schedules or temporary transfers to other positions; use of remote technology for job supports; and teleworking. **The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** and **the Job Accommodation Network** have information regarding reasonable accommodations specific to the pandemic.

▶ Time off. If the individual or a member of their household is exposed to the virus or becomes ill, they should understand their rights under the employer's sick leave policy, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the expanded availability of leave under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. That act allows for up to two weeks paid leave if an employee or their family member becomes ill with the coronavirus or if the employee has been exposed. **Visit the Department of Labor's website for more information.**

The Role of Home Supports and Employment

Supports at home from family, housemates, or residential staff are always important for employment success, but even more so during the pandemic. Communicate with the household and residential support staff, and plan for ongoing supports for the individual who is working. Key issues include:

▶ How employment supports will be provided, the use of remote supports, and the role of the household in assisting (e.g., helping with technology)

▶ Assisting with ensuring proper use of PPE in the workplace and community

▶ Reinforcement of employer safety requirements and precautions to use when out in the community and while commuting

▶ Transportation for employment, particularly if that is a role the household is responsible for

▶ Changes in the individual's working conditions

and work schedule as a result of the pandemic

▶ How the individual is doing in the home and whether there are any changes (increased anxiety, etc.)

As the situation evolves, with the individual's permission, maintain ongoing communication with the household and residential support staff to discuss any issues that arise.

Job Site Supports

Providing employment supports remotely: Using technology and apps for job site check-ins and coaching

With the pandemic, the use of technology for employment supports has become more critical. Technology can assist with job supports in two ways:

1. Provision of live job coaching remotely, using video, voice, text, or email. This includes assisting individuals with mastering job tasks. Using Zoom (with screen-share feature) or FaceTime, for example, you can share information, make observations, and offer feedback to individuals looking to improve on a job skill or set of skills.

2. Use of assistive technology and apps that support an individual in performance of their job (e.g., checklists, video modeling, etc.) without the need for a job coach.

Some technology and apps require internet access. Work with the individual and the employer on how to access the internet at work (which would typically be through Wi-Fi), or find alternatives that do not require internet access. Employers may have restrictions on use of smartphones and other technology in the workplace. It may require negotiation and advocacy to allow the individual to use this technology, including requesting its use as a reasonable accommodation.

(See the other publication in this series **Using Today's Technology for Remote Support, Self-Management, and Success in Employment and the Community** for additional details.)

Providing supports at the job site

Ideally in-person supports will be minimized, but they still may be necessary. In providing in-person supports, consider the following:

▶ If an individual requires on-site support, inquire and assess if employment supports (e.g., job coaches) can even visit the individual at their job site. In some states, job coaches may be

considered essential workers, but onsite presence may still require negotiations with the employer.

▶ If allowed onsite, follow the employer's guidelines regarding COVID-19, PPE, and social distancing, and take steps to ensure your own personal safety and protection.

▶ Provide needed on-site support and guidance, facilitate natural supports, and suggest and implement self-management strategies for the individual with the intention of providing future supports remotely (if possible).

Working with Employers

Build relations with employers and demonstrate responsiveness and support

Checking in regularly with employers during this time is vital. Reach out to the employer to discuss the current situation and how your agency can assist and provide support. Weekly check-ins via phone, email, or videoconferencing demonstrate ongoing support to individuals and to the business. As always, inquire about the employee's work performance, areas of strength or necessary improvement, and any relevant feedback. As necessary, continue to provide support and advocacy via following up with employers on behalf of individuals' status changes (such as the need to take time off, or desire to return to work).

Areas to address with employers

Emphasize to the business that the individual wants to continue working and that the agency is available to support that in any way it can. Specific areas related to the pandemic may include:

▶ Changes in the individual's work tasks

▶ Impact on supervision and co-workers (including availability to assist the individual)

▶ Impact on the individual's schedule in terms of hours of work and number of hours

▶ Company policy changes as a result of COVID-19

▶ Employer requirements in terms of PPE and steps being taken to ensure safety of employees

▶ Additional supports being provided to workers by the employer

▶ How the individual is doing in relation to the situation, and any changes in performance

▶ How the agency can help in supporting the individual

▶ The shift to provision of agency supports remotely, either partially or fully, and how that will occur

▶ The possible need for on-site presence of job coaching and whether that's allowed

▶ Any accommodations the person needs as a result of the pandemic

▶ Longer-term impact in terms of job stability

▶ How the business is being impacted by the pandemic

▶ Ways that the agency can be supportive of the business in general

If supports will be provided remotely, discuss the technology the individual will be using on the job site to receive those supports, how the employer can support this (availability of internet, etc.), and whether there are any concerns about using technology for remote supports. As noted, you may have to advocate for use of technology as a reasonable accommodation.

Advocate only as necessary

As always with providing supports, it is best if the individual advocates on their own behalf to the maximum extent possible, with agency advocacy done as necessary. And respect the individual's right to privacy and confidentiality in any discussions with the employer.

Supporting Individuals Working from Home

During the pandemic, an individual may have to work from home. If this is the case, ensure the person is set up properly to work remotely, and provide ongoing guidance and assistance.

▶ Ensure individuals have all the necessary technology and devices, such as computers, tablets, smartphones, and internet access.

▶ Work with the individual to understand how to use the technology to do their job.

▶ Help the individual to find or create a designated workspace at home to minimize distractions and maintain productivity.

▶ Help create and encourage the use of a task list. This can make it easier for the individual to prioritize job duties while staying organized and efficient.

▶ Ensure the individual is abiding by any employer requirements in terms of working from home (completing time sheets online, writing a weekly summary of duties, etc.).

▶ If the individual is participating in online meetings, review protocols for doing so, such as muting when not speaking, dressing professionally, staying engaged in the discussion, and following all necessary safety and security guidelines. Do a run-through on use of technology for online meetings to ensure the individual fully understands how to use the technology.

▶ Work with the employer regarding level of supervision and guidance being provided remotely.

▶ Work with the individual's household on assistance and supports that will enable the person to work successfully from home.

▶ Work with the employer to help ensure sufficient remote supervision and support.

▶ Given that typical natural supports in the workplace are not necessarily available, the level of employment services staff support may need to be increased.

Addressing Lack of Support for Employment by Home or Guardian

A challenge in individuals continuing to work may be a lack of support from the family, residential staff, other household members, or a legal guardian. Addressing such situations can be challenging, as there are a mix of issues including individual rights and household dynamics. There may be legitimate reasons for this lack of support, including safety concerns for the individual or others in the home due to the individual's potential exposure to coronavirus. At the same time, it is important that the individual's right to self-determination in wanting to work be respected.

If there is resistance in terms of supporting the individual to continue working, try the following:

▶ Support and assist the individual to negotiate with family, residential staff, other household members, and guardians. This may include discussing that the individual wants to work, explaining that the employer is requiring the individual to work (if that is the case), reviewing the precautions being taken in the workplace, talking about the implications if the individual stops working (including possible loss of job), and outlining steps that can be taken within the household to address concerns.

▶ Analyze the situation from an individual rights perspective. Do family members, residential staff, other household members, or a legal guardian have the right to say the individual cannot go to work? Is this a violation of the individual's right to self-determination and making decisions based on informed choice?

▶ Even if the individual can't legally be prohibited from going to work, there are other dynamics to consider. For example, they may live with someone who has a compromised immune system whose rights to health and safety also need to be considered. Also, an individual's insistence on going to work when the family is opposed, could cause significant tension in personal relationships.

▶ Some people who are continuing to work during the pandemic are temporarily changing their living situations. If the individual's household is unable to support the decision to go to work, is there a friend or relative they can move in with, or another residence available? Such a decision would not be made lightly and may be problematic, but it is at least worth considering.

Summary

During this challenging time, individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to demonstrate their value as a critical part of the workforce. Similarly, the programs that support them can demonstrate their ability to be highly responsive to the needs of individuals and the business community, while overcoming numerous obstacles. This is also a time to experiment with new and different ways of providing supports for workers with disabilities with potential long-term benefits. So while this is a challenging time, it also a time of real opportunity.

> "It is nearly impossible to make your own future, when you are not part of the economic fabric of the culture you live in."
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> –Patricia Deegan, disability rights advocate

While it is a challenging time for many workers and businesses, it is still important for businesses, service providers, and most importantly individuals with disabilities themselves to recognize the strength and importance of a diverse workforce that is fully inclusive of people with disabilities. Now is a time, possibly more than ever, that people with disabilities have the opportunity to demonstrate their high value in the workplace, as individuals who are flexible, adaptable, and can deal with whatever challenges come their way.

RESOURCES

Plain Language Information on COVID-19

The following resources provide simple and clear information on COVID-19 that can be helpful to keep individuals safe in the workplace.

- ▶ Update and Links to Coronavirus Information
  Variety of information sheets, videos, and webinars (Self-Advocacy and Beyond)
- ▶ Video: Virus Safety for People with Disabilities (TRN)
- ▶ Video: What You Need to Know About COVID-19 (Rooted in Rights)

Job Accommodation Information

- ▶ What You Should Know About COVID-19 and the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Other EEO Laws (EEOC)
- ▶ Accommodation and Compliance: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (JAN)

Health & Safety

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- ▶ How to Protect Yourself and Others
- ▶ Using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)l

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