

Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce



Transition Together

Certified Public Manager® Program
CPM Solutions Alabama 2022



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Team Members	3
Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	5
Background Information	6
Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA)	7
Services Provided	9
Accomplishments and Successes	11
Easterseals Central Alabama.....	11
Project Search Alabama	11
Learning Experience and Placement (LEaP)	12
Transition Unlimited Initiative	13
Challenges Faced by ADRS	13
Research Findings	14
Georgia.....	14
Minnesota.....	15
Montana	15
Tennessee	15
Recommendations	16
Website Improvements	16
Informative Flyers	17
Virtual Job Shadowing.....	17
Conclusion	18
References	19

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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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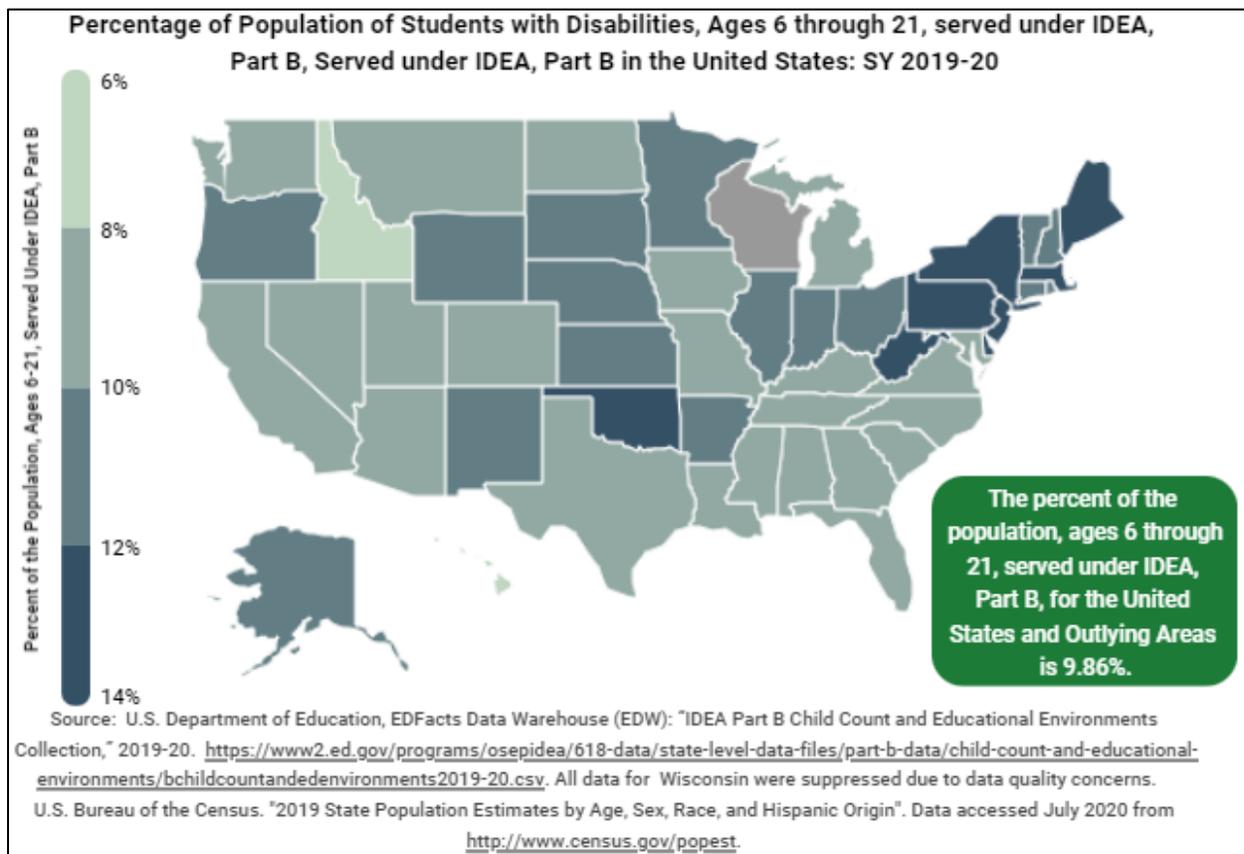
The *Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce* CPM Solutions Alabama 2022 team would like to acknowledge all of the vocational rehabilitation counselors and educators across the state for their commitment to ensuring Alabama students with disabilities have the ability to successfully transition into employment and lead meaningful, successful lives.

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INTRODUCTION

What does life after high school graduation look like? How will I become a productive member of society? How will I live a life with meaning and purpose? These questions can be daunting for students as they navigate the challenges posed during this stage of their life. However, for students with disabilities, these challenges may be insurmountable without the proper resources and guidance. According to the United States Office of Special Education Programs, approximately 9.86% of the population of public education students (ages 6-21) have disabilities (U. S. Department of Education – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). In Alabama, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) is devoted to ensuring individuals with disabilities, including these students, can achieve their maximum potential.

Figure 1 - Percentage of Student Population with Disabilities, Ages 6 through 21



The *Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce* CPM Solutions Alabama 2022 team has researched initiatives for preparing Alabama students with disabilities to become productive employees and is recommending strategies to strengthen the success in preparing these students in joining the workforce and fulfilling their employment goals.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law to ensure people with disabilities are afforded the same rights and opportunities as everyone else (U. S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division). In Alabama, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services serves the state's children and adults with disabilities. Early on, this agency was incorporated into the Alabama Department of Education. However, state officials recognized the need for an independent state agency, and in 1994, legislators voted to create ADRS as its own state agency (Hitchcock, L. I., 2021). Demand and an increased awareness for the need of rehabilitative services have driven ADRS to the agency it is today.

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services is broken down into four principal programs, including Early Intervention (EI), Children's Rehabilitation Service (CRS), Vocational Rehabilitation Service (VRS), and State of Alabama Independent Living Service (SAIL). The largest of these programs, VRS, provides educational and vocational assistance to adolescents and adults with disabilities. For students, the program works in partnership with local school systems, colleges, and universities to provide transition services (Figure 2). Transition services are designed to assist a student in moving from school to post-school activities while considering a student's individual needs. To qualify, the student must have a disability. The ADA defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment (U. S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division).

Figure 2 - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Transition Services Definition

According to IDEA, transition services are a coordinated set of activities that..

1. ...is results oriented, facilitating the transition from school to post-school activities, to include:

- Postsecondary education
- Vocational education
- Integrated employment
- Continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation

2. ...is based on individual child's needs and accounts for strengths, preferences, and interests, and includes the following:

- Instruction
- Related services
- Community experiences
- The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives
- If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a function vocational evaluation

3. ...may be special education, if provided as specially designed instruction or related service, if required to assist a child with a disability benefit from special education.

(U. S. Department of Education – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)

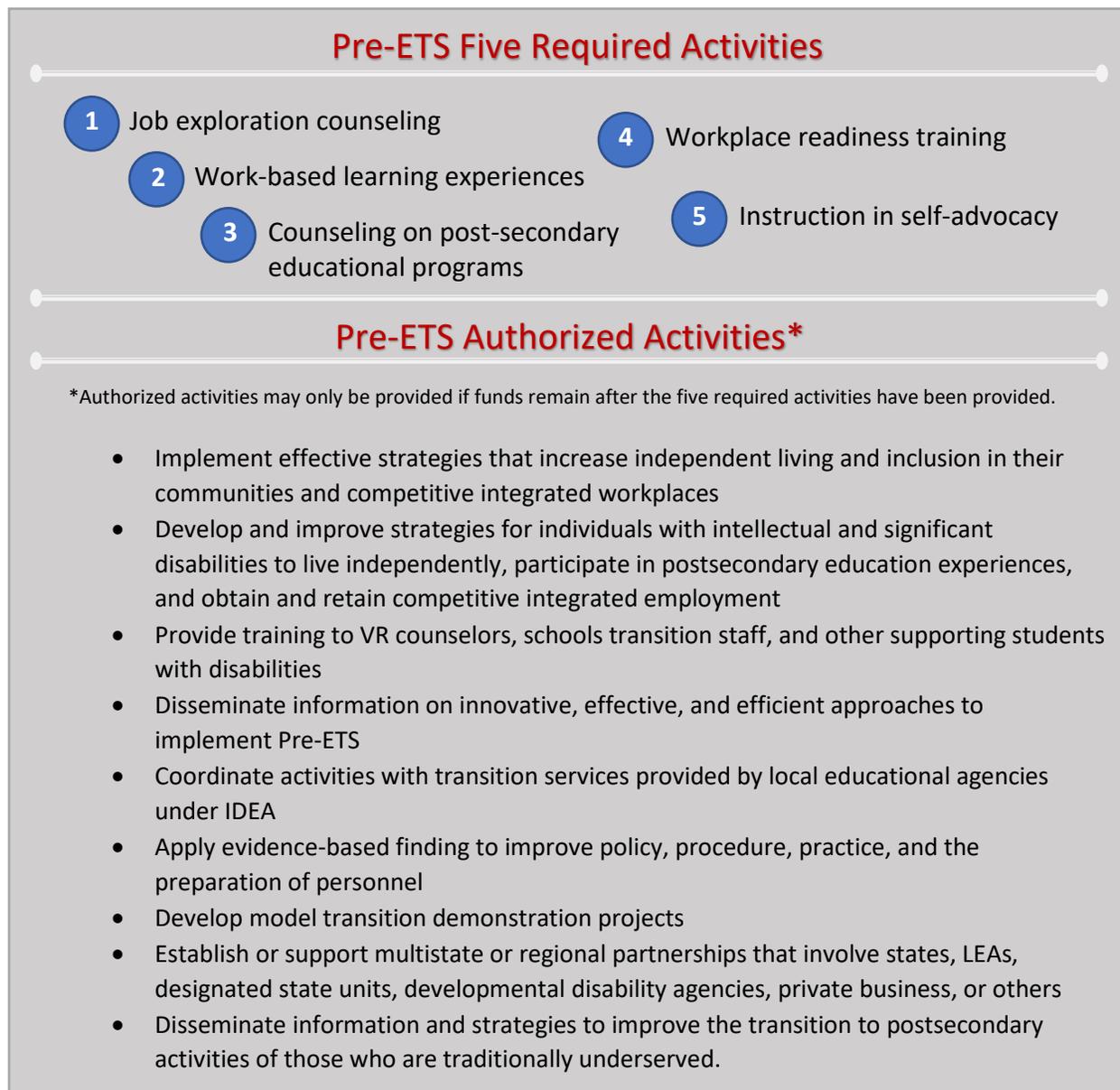
WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 2014 (WIOA)

On July 22, 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law with an aim to strengthen the public workforce system by requiring states to align workforce development programs to match the needs of both job seekers and employers. By providing access to the appropriate education, training, and support services, job seekers, including those with significant barriers, can enter high-quality jobs and careers. In turn, employers are afforded the ability to hire and retain the needed skilled workers allowing them to compete in the global economy (U. S. Department of Labor – Employment and Training Administration).

One highlight of the reforms to the public workforce system includes an improvement of services to individuals with disabilities. A specific requirement of the WIOA as it pertains to this subject involves a requirement for vocational rehabilitation (VR) state agencies to reserve no less than 15 percent of its federal allotment to provide, or arrange for the provision of, pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially

eligible for VR services (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center, 2016). Five pre-employment transition services are required by WIOA, and certain additional services are also authorized to be provided using remaining funding.

Figure 3 - Pre-ETS “required” and “authorized” activities



(Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center, 2016)

SERVICES PROVIDED

Pre-ETS services were provided by ADRS to approximately 7,800 individuals on average during Program Years 2017 – 2019, with an approximate average of 22,000 individuals served overall through VRS (U. S. Department of Education – Rehabilitation Services Administration).

Figure 4 - Prevalence of disability among non-institutionalized people aged 16-20 in the U.S. in 2018

Disability Type	%	MOE	Number	MOE	Base Pop.	Sample Size
Any Disability	6.3	0.14	1,351,500	30,380	21,515,100	206,254
Visual	1.1	3.29	244,300	12,940	21,515,100	206,254
Hearing	0.6	3.29	139,700	9,790	21,515,100	206,254
Ambulatory	0.7	3.29	160,900	10,500	21,515,100	206,254
Cognitive	4.4	0.12	940,400	25,360	21,515,100	206,254
Self-Care	0.8	3.29	162,100	10,540	21,515,100	206,254
Independent Living	2.5	0.09	537,900	19,190	21,515,100	206,254

(Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S, 2020)

Based on an American Community Survey, the estimated population of individuals 16 – 21 years of age in Alabama can be estimated to be between 350,000 and 400,000 with a prevalence of any disability among non-institutionalized people at 6.7% (Cornell University, 2022).

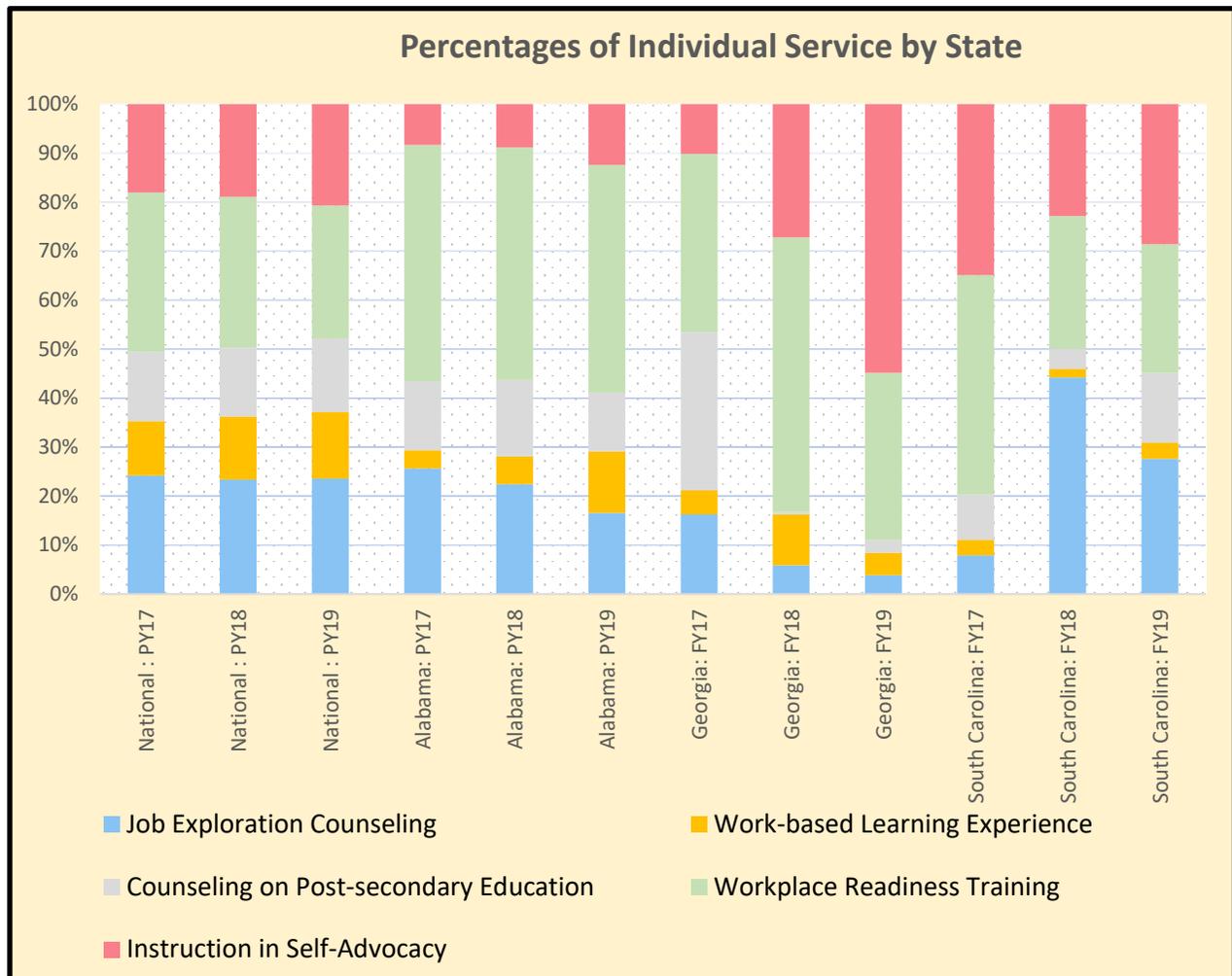
Therefore, ADRS is providing Pre-ETS services to approximately 31% of individuals with disabilities in the target age range.

In a Government Accountability Office Report (GAO-18-502), titled “Student with Disabilities – Additional Information from Education Could Help States Provide Pre-Employment Transition Services”, Alabama was one of twenty-one states reporting that they used 15% or more of the total VR grant for pre-ETS services (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Based on data provided by ADRS, the average expenditure on the five required Pre-ETS activities between FY2017 and FY2022 was \$5,329,157.81. Additionally, ADRS spends around 3 million on contracts and 2-3 million on salaries, benefits, and travel, all of which can be counted towards the 15%. For FY2022, 15% of the federal allotment was \$10,491,639.45 with a carryover of \$4,522,540.29 from FY2021, totaling \$15,014,179.74 available for ADRS to spend on Pre-ETS activities. It appears that ADRS is effectively spending their 15% on pre-ETS activities; however, ADRS does report carry over funding. This may represent an opportunity to invest in ways to better provide services without sacrificing existing provisions of services.

While ADRS actively seeks to provide all five of the required activities, the most prevalent activities are Job Exploration Counseling and Workplace Readiness Training. Figure 5 shows a comparison of the national percentages compared with several of the states reviewed. Alabama’s performance in this area tracks closely with the national average, especially for Program Year 2019.

Increasing the percentage of students with disabilities receiving services from ADRS, ensuring the spending target of 15% of VR grant funds is met and that these funds are also spent in a meaningful way, and increasing services outside of job exploration counseling and workplace readiness training are the areas of focus for the recommendations provided in this report.

Figure 5 - Comparison of Services Provided by % for Select States



(U. S. Department of Education – Rehabilitation Services Administration.)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND SUCCESSES

ADRS collaborates with various state agencies, community organizations, and outside entities to provide valuable and transformative services to Alabama students with disabilities. Selected programs are highlighted in the following sections.

EASTERSEALS CENTRAL ALABAMA (ESCA)

Easterseals is a national non-profit provider of services for individuals with various disabilities with a mission to ensure that all people with disabilities have equal opportunities to live, learn, work, and play (ESCA). ADRS has collaborated with Easterseals of Central Alabama on several programs. One of these programs, Job Exploration Training (JET), is a three-week summer work-based learning opportunity for eligible and potentially eligible students in high school who are funded by ADRS (ESCA). The CPM Solutions Alabama team conducted interviews with Courtney Dotson, a State Office Administrator at ADRS and Micah Williamson, a Rehabilitation Specialist III at ADRS, to learn more about the JET program provided by the Easterseals of Central Alabama (ESCA). This opportunity is offered to any eligible or potentially eligible student in high school. This year approximately forty students from various area high schools participated (Lowndes, Montgomery, and Elmore County School Systems). Students who are chosen are entering 11th or 12th grade, must express an interest in participating, have necessary I-9 documentation, and have access to reliable transportation. As part of the program, students participate in an internship at a participating worksite for approximately 25 hours each week. Numerous worksite locations are available including several YMCA locations across central Alabama and businesses such as Priester's Pecans, AG grocery stores, Cash Saver, Tractor Supply, Jim Woodham and Son Tire and Auto, and Cintas.

PROJECT SEARCH ALABAMA

Project SEARCH Marshall County is a nine-month, in-school program created around the school year calendar that is designed to immerse Marshall County School System high school students with significant disabilities in an unpaid work experience with the ultimate goal of a successful transition to adult life. To gain an understanding of the program, the CPM Solutions

Alabama team interviewed, Courtney Dotson, a State Office Administrator at ADRS. According to information obtained during this interview, students must be VR consumers, in their final year of high school, and must defer their diploma to participate. Once accepted, students are provided orientation about the business to support them as they prepare for their internship. As they participate, the interns are engaged at the business each program day for a minimum of six hours per day for the entirety of the academic year. Employability skills training is provided a minimum of sixty to ninety minutes of each day and training in the internship position is conducted for a minimum of five hours each day. Project SEARCH Marshall County utilizes two hospital campuses, Marshall Medical Center North and Marshall Medical Center South, for the worksite locations. Ten students enrolled in the Project SEARCH Marshall County Program in the 2021-2022 school year. Candidates for the program are typically referred to the program by their school, a family member, Pre-Employment Transition Specialist, or VR Counselor. Project SEARCH team members consist of the Project SEARCH instructor, host business liaison, A VR Counselor, community rehabilitation provider, and other appropriate personnel. For this year, 50% of the participants were hired by the workplace. Additionally, over 95% of participants have successfully entered the workforce.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND PLACEMENT

ADRS is currently implementing the Learning Experience and Placement (LEaP) program. The program is open to individuals who are eligible for employment in the field and offers three opportunities to learn more about ADRS and the career opportunities within. These three employment opportunities available include job shadowing, on-site paid experiences, and unpaid learning experiences. Training can be completed in various categories such as therapy and other medical, education, counseling and employment services, accounting, computer services, and human resources. The LEaP website (Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services) allows eligible individuals and consumers to apply online for entrance into the program.

TRANSITION UNLIMITED INITIATIVE

After WIOA passed in 2014, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services began collaborating with the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI) of Auburn University to host the Transition Unlimited Initiative. This initiative was designed to increase and enhance the pre-employment transition services that are provided to all qualifying students throughout Alabama. The focus of Transition Unlimited is to offer guidance and collaboration with local education agencies to achieve successful implementation of pre-employment transition services. As part of Transition Unlimited, school administration, counselors, teachers, and other educational staff collaborate with vocational rehabilitation counselors to form teams that represent each local high school. All team members work together to develop an action plan for the pre-employment transition services. These action plans are uploaded to the Transition Unlimited website hosted by Auburn University and are visible to all teams across the state. Accessibility of plans allows for the sharing of resources and ideas and the ability to monitor and document progress. Technical guidance from ATLI staff is also available during each step of the process.

Findings from the development and implementation of action plans have revealed unique needs for individual school systems and students and thus has allowed for focused resources and services as warranted. Exposure to services for students at a younger age has resulted in the preferences and interests being considered in services provided to the students as they progress through school. Ultimately, positive post-school outcomes for youth and their families increase when effective collaboration mechanisms among stakeholders, such as those with Transition Unlimited, have been put into place (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative). Successes stemming from Transition Unlimited have led to ADRS being recognized by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT:C) as well as state agencies across the country as a leader of innovation regarding interagency collaboration.

CHALLENGES FACED BY ADRS

Nationwide, counselor shortages are a primary factor affecting the ability of VR agencies to provide transition services to students with disabilities. During interviews conducted with ADRS as well as VR agencies in Georgia and Oklahoma, this challenge was described as significant

and one that is faced daily. In Alabama, this barrier has led to elevated counselor caseloads and some transportation issues. With a smaller number of counselors covering a larger area, fewer students may be reached, especially in rural areas. Impairment of the ability to provide transportation for students to and from services may lead to a lack of students receiving these services.

Another challenge faced across Alabama is the lack of readily available high-speed internet access. In today's world of technology, access to digital devices with broadband internet available has become essential to ensure opportunities remains equal. Although approximately 88.6% of all Alabamians now have access to high-speed internet, many rural areas across Alabama, particularly in the Black Belt counties, do not have broadband readily available (Smith, M., 2020). In fact, according to the Equal Justice Initiative, the percentage of residents in these counties with broadband at home is in the single digits (Equal Justice Initiative). This lack of access may result in the ability for a significant number of students and their families to obtain important information regarding Pre-ETS and other available services while at home.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

As part of our research to investigate strategies currently utilized by other states, the *Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce* CPM Solutions Alabama 2022 team contacted multiple VR agencies across the country, investigated their existing programs, and visited websites devoted to these agencies. Selected findings from this research have been described in the sections below.

GEORGIA

Our team conducted an interview with Ms. Lora Raines at the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA). During this interview, Ms. Raines described an increase in the prevalence of virtual job shadowing as a means to supplement in-person job shadowing when transportation of students becomes difficult. In general, virtual job shadowing involves a student using an internet connection to follow an employee virtually during their work activities with opportunities to ask questions.

MINNESOTA

Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the state of Minnesota is found on the website for its parent agency, the Department of Employment and Economic Development. A page devoted specifically to high school students with disabilities provides information for students, schools, and parents. Of note, a YouTube video describing Pre-Employment Transition Services greets each page visitor. By visiting the career services staff section, website visitors are able to search by city, school district, or specific school to locate the assigned VRS staff and their respective contact information. In addition, Minnesota provides a comprehensive resource guide dedicated to preparing students with disabilities for employment.

MONTANA

The Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS) is a part of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. Upon entering the website for VRBS, the user is introduced to the vision, mission, and core values of the agency, and a general description of the organization and staff is provided. Notably, an introductory video is presented which is provided in four formats: standard, closed caption, signer for the deaf, and descriptive audio. The Pre-Employment Transition Services page provides clickable links for each service, which then navigates to a detailed description of that service with numerous valuable resources including websites, surveys, brochures, and videos. The Pre-ETS website also provides resources for parents and educators.

TENNESSEE

The website for the Division of Rehabilitation Services for the state of Tennessee is found on the Tennessee Department of Human Services website. The Transition Services portion of this website includes information regarding Pre-Employment Transition Services as well as two programs offered in Tennessee, Project SEARCH and the Transition School to Work Program. Informative videos and program applications are available online for both of these programs. Additionally, the Department of Human Services partnered with the Tennessee Department of Education, Vanderbilt University, and the Vanderbilt Kennedy UCEDD to offer a valuable

supporting website called Transition Tennessee, which is touted as “Tennessee’s online home for training and resources on preparing students with disabilities for life after high school” (Transition Tennessee). This program provides resources to consumers, professionals, and educators and includes free training and continuing education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The previously referenced report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO-18-502) noted that a large reason many organizations struggle to spend available funds in a meaningful way is a lack of information regarding authorized activities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Maximizing the use of available funds to provide services in the most meaningful way, increasing awareness of these services available to students, and expanding upon the services already provided will ensure the goal of ADRS is met.

As discussed previously in this paper, statewide counselor shortages and disadvantages in rural communities have posed some challenges to the agency’s ability to provide required services. The *Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce* CPM Solutions Alabama 2022 team has considered both the existing challenges and insights from the research discussed above, and the following recommendations are being offered to assist with overcoming these obstacles. The team is proposing that efforts to increase efficiency and effectiveness in providing general information regarding available services, opportunities, and other resources may result in the existing counselors having more time available for providing services and reaching new consumers. Additionally, the team is recommending the expansion of virtual services provided when transportation is not available.

WEBSITE IMPROVEMENTS

The first step to ensuring students with disabilities are provided the best opportunity of success in transitioning to gainful employment is to ensure that these students and their families are aware of all programs available to guide them in this direction. With many meaningful and beneficial programs available, advertising becomes an essential first step.

With high-speed internet access available to schools and the majority of Alabama families, an informative and interactive website can be the first point of contact for students, their families, and educators. We recommend the following improvements to the ADRS website:

- 1) Ensure website pages are optimized and easily navigated and that features are ADA compliant.
- 2) Provide usability of the website for mobile devices, as these are sometimes the only devices available in homes.
- 3) Provide searchable contact information for staff members assigned to each school system.
- 4) Provide a detailed and easy-to-follow FAQ page to assist with the understanding of services and processes.
- 5) Create web-based forms for applications as a means to eliminate lost forms and reduce timely paperwork.
- 6) Provide informational and training videos describing services and completing forms.
- 7) Consider an automated or live chat feature for website visitor assistance.

INFORMATIVE FLYERS

As previously described, a lack of internet access may play a role in limiting some students from becoming aware of and participating in the services and programs offered by ADRS and other organizations. The team is recommending that detailed and informative brochures and/or flyers be provided to all schools within the state to ensure that students and their families who may be unable to research opportunities independently are then reached.

VIRTUAL JOB SHADOWING

As discussed, counselor shortages and related transportation issues have resulted in some barriers in the ability of ADRS to provide in-person transition services. Therefore, as a means to supplement these in-person services, we recommend expansion of virtual services including, in particular, virtual job shadowing. Because of an expectation of this program to become readily available across the state, students could have the ability to explore career opportunities that

may not be available in a nearby location. In addition, students could gain an early start on their career exploration and planning paths.

CONCLUSION

The path for a student into adult life can be a challenging one, particularly for students with disabilities. While they may face many hurdles along the way, these students are supported by the pre-employment transition services provided by ADRS as they make this move into employment and a new stage in their lives. The commitment of ADRS to ensuring that students with disabilities successfully make this transition is evident by the passion of the agency shown in the services and programs offered. The *Preparing Alabama Students with Disabilities for the Workforce* CPM Solutions Alabama 2022 team is hopeful that recommendations included within this paper will improve upon the progress already made and additional students can benefit from the valuable services provided by ADRS.

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