

# Connecting Young Adults with Disabilities to Employment

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# W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

- Independent, not-for-profit research institute founded in 1945
- *Mission:* study policy-related issues of employment and unemployment and experiment with innovative ways to help the unemployed
- Manage federal and state-funded workforce programs in 4-county region (Michigan Works! Southwest)
- Manage grant-funded programs to provide wraparound services to individuals living in high-poverty areas facing serious barriers to work.



# My background

- Joined the Upjohn Institute in January 2006, now senior researcher
- Professor of Political Science at Grand Valley State University
- 18 years studying the tuition-free college movement
- Co-director of institute's research initiative, *Policies for Place – Community Strategies for Good Jobs*
- Personal connection to this topic
- Co-investigator for this work is [Beth Truesdale](#), Institute Research Fellow (and a sociologist who specializes in labor and public policy)



# Research questions

- How is the system of support organized for young adults with disabilities transitioning to employment?
- How do young adults with disabilities and their families/guardians learn about, understand and use that system?

## *Methods:*

- Policy research
- Data collection and analysis
- interviews with families, young adults, and service providers



# Initial focus of research

- Young adults (ages 18-26)
- Intellectual/developmental disability (IDD)
  - MRS functional definition: “You must have a physical or mental disability that makes it difficult for you to find and keep a job.”
  - Not focusing on physical disabilities in this research
- Employment-seeking (not necessarily full time)
- Kalamazoo County – services delivered through county-level agencies
  - Future work includes cross-county and cross-state comparisons



# Goals and desired outcomes

- Understand nature and structure of system serving this population
- Understand how this population accesses and navigates this system
  - What do families understand about the system, and where are their gaps in their understanding?
  - What services are most widely used, and where are the gaps in services?
  - How do different parts of the system work together, and where could alignment be improved?
- Put usable information into the hands of families, service providers to increase knowledge and alignment, and make system more effective



# A few initial insights

- Complexity of system hinders user understanding and access
  - Federal \$\$, state agencies, local implementation
  - Disincentives to work embedded in law
- Dedicated people working within constraints (staffing, rules)
- Lack of clear navigation along transition pathway
  - Person-centered planning but services not integrated from a user perspective
  - Confusion about scope of services – who covers what, and for whom?
- Information delivery varies from place to place
  - Guardianship v. supported decision-making example



# I need your help!

- Would you be willing to sit down with me for an hour and tell me about your work?
  - *What are you most proud of in your own organization's work?*
  - *What have you seen work well in the work of other organizations?*
  - *What gets in the way of you doing the work you want to do?*
  - *If you could wave a magic wand and change something about the system, what would it be?*
- Do you have suggestions of parents / family members of young adults with disabilities who might be willing to talk with me about their experiences?
- Do you have questions about this research?

Reach out to me at: [miller-adams@upjohn.org](mailto:miller-adams@upjohn.org)

