



Unlocking Potential: Key Lessons from Kessler Foundation's Signature Grants on Employment for People with Disabilities

A White Paper for Professionals in Grantmaking, Workforce Development, Disability Employment, and Human Resources

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Abstract

Since 2005, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$55 million in funding a variety of programs that have assisted “over 10,000 people with disabilities acquire jobs and training.”¹ Kessler Foundation’s Signature Employment Grants program awards funding to organizations to use innovation to increase the employment and retention of individuals with disabilities. Each program is evaluated against its goals and projected outcomes.²

The Foundation contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey to review interim and final evaluation reports for programs that began as early as 2015 and ended in or prior to 2022. Analysis of the 21 Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant programs implemented during this period illuminates multiple findings that contribute to the larger body of lessons learned about how organizations can help individuals with disabilities find and maintain employment. Strong collaborations, high organizational capacity, leveraged collaborations, agility, clear and concise goals, effective communication, and strategic coordination were all elements that increased the likelihood of programmatic success and positive outcomes.

¹ <https://kesslerfoundation.org/what-we-fund/grant-listings-year>

² The Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University was the third-party evaluator for the programs analyzed for this white paper. A list of all 21 programs can be found in Appendix C. Additionally, a list of all interim and final program evaluation reports is available in Appendix D.

Executive Summary

Employment for Individuals with Disabilities

The employment rate for individuals with disabilities has historically been lower than for their non-disabled counterparts.³ Economic impacts such as the Great Recession were also worse and longer lasting for individuals with disabilities.⁴ Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the employment-to-population ratio of working adults without disabilities was 75% compared to 31% for those with disabilities.⁵ The impact of the pandemic on employment participation rates was profoundly negative for all workers, with rates dropping to 63% for working adults without disabilities and 26% for working adults with disabilities.⁶ However, recent employment indicators point to an upward trend in employment for people with disabilities. In 2023, the average monthly employment-to-population ratio increased to 37.1%, an all-time high.⁷ The reasons for this are unclear, but likely contributors are the recent labor shortage, increased numbers of job postings, increased wages, the increased prevalence of accommodation funds and diversity/inclusion programs at places of work, as well as a greater number of employers allowing remote work, which can benefit workers with disabilities.⁸ Kessler Foundation strives to drive positive change for individuals with disabilities through advanced rehabilitative research and by funding innovative employment opportunities to create genuine economic opportunities through its Center for Grantmaking. The Foundation is a direct advocate of positive change in employer culture and hiring practices to increase the number of individuals with disabilities employed nationally.⁹



Overview of Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grants Program

Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grants program funds "new pilot initiatives, demonstration projects, or social ventures that lead to a generation of new ideas to solve the high unemployment and underemployment of individuals with disabilities."¹⁰ The Foundation states a preference for interventions centered on the employment of people with disabilities that include a focus on intersectionality, or the intersection of multiple identities, such as race, class, gender, disability, and poverty. The program also stresses that innovation should be at the core of Signature Employment Grants and defines innovation as a "new idea or process that will spark new models to increase employment outcomes for people with disabilities."¹¹ A range of organizations are eligible to apply for funding, including

³ Houtenville A., & Rafal M. (2024). *Annual report on people with disabilities in America*. Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics. <https://www.researchondisability.org/sites/default/files/media/2024-03/2024-annual-report-a11y-1.pdf>

⁴ Houtenville, A., Rozell, D. M., O'Neill, J., Whiteside, L., & Holmes, P. (2020). *nTIDE lunch & learn webinar series* [Webinar]. Kessler Foundation and Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. Livermore, G., & Honeycutt, T. (2015). Employment and economic well-being of people with and without disabilities before and after the Great Recession. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 26, 70-79.

⁵ Kessler Foundation and Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. (2020). *National trends in disability and employment: February 2020 jobs report: Third month of job gains for Americans with disabilities*.

⁶ Kessler Foundation and Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. (2020). *National trends in disability and employment: April 2020 jobs report: COVID recession hits workers with disabilities harder*.

⁷ Kessler Foundation. (2024). *Unprecedented success continues: 2023 employment gains for people with disabilities outshine those of counterparts without disabilities* [Press Release]. <https://kesslerfoundation.org/press-release/unprecedented-success-continues-2023-employment-gains-people-disabilities-outshine>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://kesslerfoundation.org/about-us>

¹⁰ <https://kesslerfoundation.org/what-we-fundcenter-grantmaking/signature-employment-grants>

¹¹ Ibid.

nonprofit agencies, public or private schools, and public institutions, such as universities and local, state, and federal governmental entities based in the United States or any of its territories. Applicants submit an online concept paper that is initially reviewed by staff. A subset of applicants is selected to submit a full grant proposal to the Foundation. Final grant candidates are then selected from that pool and interviewed by Kessler's grantmaking committee. All final grant recipients must be approved by the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Goals of the White Paper

The primary goal of this paper is to understand successful program elements and to explore commonalities of successful Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant programs as well as the challenges and barriers faced by programs between 2015 and 2022. The purpose of this exploration is to collect best practices as well as to better understand how collaborations, employer engagement, and lesser-explored elements such as trust, affect the ability of organizations to increase the employment and retention of job seekers with disabilities.

Research Questions

Researchers used a set of research questions to guide the analysis. Findings were grouped by question. The following questions guided the analysis of the recipients of Kessler's Signature Employment Grants.

Programmatic Success

- ▶ In what ways did Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grant program lead to the employment of job seekers with disabilities?
- ▶ What did successful programs have in common? Were there commonalities across various successful program elements (even if the program itself did not meet its intended targets)?

Prior Experience

- ▶ How did program staff's prior experience implementing workforce programs (or piloting the evaluated program) affect their ability to implement the evaluated program? Did prior experience increase the likelihood of programmatic/overall success?

Organizational Capacity

- ▶ What role did organizational capacity play in implementation and likelihood of success? Which specific issues with resources challenged programmatic success?

Collaborations

- ▶ What elements led to successful collaborations? In what ways did collaborations affect program implementation? In what circumstances did collaborations create elements of programmatic success? In what ways did collaborations lead to the employment of people with disabilities?

Trust

- ▶ How did trust among participants/consumers affect implementation of the program? How did perceptions of trust affect the program's overall success?

Challenges/Barriers

- ▶ What barriers prevented successful implementation? In what ways did barriers prevent the employment of people with disabilities?
- ▶ In what ways did program staff innovate through and overcome challenges?
- ▶ What types of challenges were difficult to overcome?
- ▶ Were there commonalities across various programs' challenges or barriers?

Findings

Analysis of the 21 Kessler Foundation-awarded programs revealed multiple findings that contribute to the larger body of lessons learned about how organizations can help people with disabilities find and maintain employment. Strong collaborations, high organizational capacity, leveraged collaborations, agility, clear and concise goals, effective communication, and strategic coordination were all elements that increased the likelihood of programmatic success and positive outcomes.



- ▶ Strong collaborations with clearly defined and delineated goals helped organizations recruit participants, find resources, and place participants in employment.
- ▶ Organizational capacity mattered when analyzing elements of success among the 21 programs. Programs led by organizations with high capacity and resources, including staff time, salary dollars, staff with various types and high levels of expertise, and strong collaborations, were more likely to experience elements of success through implementation and outcomes.
- ▶ Leveraged collaborations helped meet the needs of participants across several programs. The needs of participants were not fully understood or anticipated by the staff of several organizations. While it is not always possible to anticipate the realm of barriers faced by individuals with disabilities, programs that were responsive to participant needs and leveraged multiple partners to help meet those needs were often able to reduce participant barriers faster than those without help from partners.
- ▶ Organizations with agile staff were able to overcome challenges and innovate. Programs that were able to overcome challenges also responded quickly and pivoted direction.
- ▶ Clear and concise program goals helped organizations implement them in a timely manner. Program goals that were complex or overly ambitious were much more difficult to achieve.
- ▶ Effective communication among partners led to an increased likelihood of successful implementation.
- ▶ Strategic coordination through planning and implementation increased the likelihood of program success. Organizations that worked with their partners to coordinate implementation efforts had more success..

Introduction

Through its Signature Employment Grants program, Kessler Foundation provides two-year funding to selected innovative programs that help people with disabilities obtain meaningful employment. Since 2005, Kessler Foundation has invested significantly in funding a variety of employment-related programs that have helped individuals with disabilities obtain jobs and training. Kessler Foundation contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University to prepare an executive-level white paper based on highlights, promising practices, and challenges of Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grant program evaluations for recipients awarded in or after 2015 and whose programs were concluded by 2022. The goal of this white paper is to showcase the most notable program accomplishments, highlight promising or successful program components and workforce development strategies, and synthesize common challenges faced by the grantees that could offer important insights for future workforce development and employment programs aimed at connecting people with disabilities to the labor market and jobs.

Methodology

To conduct the analysis for this paper, Heldrich Center researchers analyzed interim and final evaluation reports for the 21 programs awarded in or after 2015 and concluded by 2022.¹² Reports were coded for themes and categories using NVivo qualitative data management software and analyzed by Heldrich Center researchers. A total of 41 reports were analyzed.¹³ Researchers began with broad codes identifying general themes and categories and refined a codebook by test-coding several reports. Interrater reliability tests were conducted to identify codes in need of further refinement. After several iterations of codebook refinement, all 41 reports were coded and analyzed.

Descriptive Summary

The 21 programs included various focal areas, employment goals, subpopulations, organizational types, and collaborations. They also began at different times, ranging from 2015 to 2020. Although Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant funding is generally specified as two-year funding, many programs received no-cost extensions that increased their program period. Most programs (14 out of 21, or 67%) took longer than two years to complete, although this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three of the 10 (30%) programs awarded funding from 2018 to 2020 were completed within two years.¹⁴ Six of the 11 (55%) programs awarded funding from 2015 to 2017 took longer than two years to complete. Most programs were led by a nonprofit organization, and many engaged in collaborations where multiple organizations or agencies worked together to implement a program. All 21 programs engaged in collaborations, although the nature of the collaborations varied across programs in terms of the number and type of organizations involved. Collaborations with employers were understandably common, and most programs engaged with multiple employers or industry types. Some programs that initially focused narrowly on employment areas, such as the Transportation Security Administration or the automotive industry, expanded their scope to include collaborations with

¹² Reports were written by members of the Heldrich Center evaluation team.

¹³ Each program generated a total of two reports (one interim and one final report per program); however, one program (*JusticeWorks*) had only a final report.

¹⁴ Programs were classified as affected by COVID-19 if the pandemic was explicitly mentioned in either the interim or final evaluation report as having an impact on the program.

other types of employers to secure employment for more job seekers with disabilities. Other single-industry collaborations, namely those in healthcare, were successful with placements at partnering hospitals. Collaborations with employers that were willing to include or expand training and education for their staff relative to hiring people with disabilities were often successful in creating cultural or organizational change, an important element in sustaining positive employment practices. Table 1 lists all 21 programs (in some cases, implementation did not start immediately after the grant award).



Many programs met their original specified employment goals. Those that did not still made significant contributions to eliminating barriers, improving the hiring process, and improving retention for job seekers with disabilities. Unmet employment goals were largely a result of challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, program staff or organizational turnover, partnership development delays, and overly ambitious goals for the program time frame. In addition, programs were integrating innovative techniques to employ and retain individuals with disabilities, and many of these innovations required significant time to optimize and implement. Some programs were fully implemented only in the later stages of the grant period. Thus, employment goals were not always met within the grant time frame.

Programs varied in their approaches to meeting their stated goals; however, many key aspects of their efforts were the same. Most programs fell into two categories relative to the model implemented. Programs either offered:

- ▶ Structured services such as curricula, trainings, technology, or education designed to increase the job search skills, social skills, or networking capabilities of job seekers with disabilities; or
- ▶ Continuous and often individualized support such as embedded case management, navigators, or coaches.

Two programs offered wraparound services, including incentives to cover extraneous costs such as transportation and to serve as motivation. Programs varied in their degrees of success meeting their stated goals. The next section of this white paper explores findings from the analysis grouped by a series of research questions.

Table 1: Descriptive Summary, by Program

Organization(s)	Program Name	Target Audience	Start Date	Duration
Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago	“Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth”	Youth with disabilities	January 2016	2 years
Anixter Center	“Inclusive Pathways”	Individuals with disabilities	January 2018	2 years, 3 months
The Arc of the United States	“JusticeWorks”	Individuals with disabilities	January 2019	1 year, 7 months
Autism Alliance of Michigan	“Upbound at Work”	Individuals with autism	January 2018	2 years
Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc.	“Works Job Club”	Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing	January 2018	2 years, 11 months
Disability Rights Louisiana	“Financial Access Inclusion and Resources”	Formerly incarcerated individuals with disabilities	May 2019	2 years, 10 months
Easterseals DC/MD/VA	“Easterseals Disability Staffing Network”	Individuals with disabilities	January 2018	2 years, 6 months

Table 1: Descriptive Summary, by Program (continued)

Organization(s)	Program Name	Target Audience	Start Date	Duration
HireAbility Vermont	"WorkVT 2.0"	Individuals with disabilities receiving Social Security Disability Insurance and/or Supplemental Security Income	January 2020	3 years
Jewish Employment and Vocational Services Human Services	"Road to Employment"	Individuals with disabilities	January 2020	2 years, 6 months
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Coalition	"Career Pathway Services"	Individuals in Massachusetts with MRC 16 status ¹⁵	January 2017	2 years
May Institute and Work Inc.	"Meaningful Jobs"	Individuals with autism	March 2017	2 years, 4 months
Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas	"Career Success"	Individuals with mental illness	January 2017	2 years
Mercy Healthcare Foundation	"Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model"	Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism	January 2016	3 years
New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities	"NYC: ATWORK"	Individuals with disabilities in New York City	March 2017	2 years, 9 months
Seeking Employment, Equality, and Community for People with Developmental Disabilities	"Maryland Customized Employment Project"	Individuals with developmental disabilities	January 2016	2 years
ServiceSource	"Warrior Bridge"	Veterans with disabilities	January 2015	2 years, 6 months
Stand Among Friends and Policyworks, Inc.	"Bridging the Gap from College to Careers"	College students with disabilities	January 2016	3 years
United Way of Allegheny County	"21 and Able Employment/ Career Transition"	Youth with disabilities	January 2015	2 years
University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities	"Virtual Work and Supports" ¹⁶	Individuals with disabilities	January 2018	4 years, 6 months
University of Michigan	"Virtual Reality Job Interview Training"	Youth with disabilities	May 2017	2 years, 7 months
Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University	"Combat2Careers"	Veterans with disabilities	January 2019	3 years

¹⁵ MRC 16 status refers to individuals with disabilities who are classified by the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission as most in need of restorative services.

¹⁶ This program was originally known as *Just in Time Employment Supports* as awarded to the University of Iowa Midwest Disability Employment Consortium in January 2018. The grant was transferred to the University of Arizona under the name *Virtual Work and Supports*, which operated through June 2022.

Findings

In what ways did Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grant program lead to the employment of job seekers with disabilities?

Offering Strong Collaborations, Individualized Support, and Relevant and Helpful Services.

Although all 21 programs included positive elements that increased the likelihood of job seekers with disabilities being hired or retained, only five programs met their originally stated employment goals during the grant period.¹⁷ These programs varied in their approach to implementation, with some offering job seekers individual coaching or counseling, and others offering technical training, education, or services. Some programs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, while others were not. At least one program lost all of its staff and had to rebuild completely during the funding period. While adversity and challenges still affected the program, all five programs led to successful outcomes in employing job seekers with disabilities. Commonalities across all five programs included:



- ▶ Key collaborations and the ability of program staff to pivot to new collaborations if or when others dissolved,
- ▶ Individualized support and a person-centric approach to helping job seekers find and achieve employment, and
- ▶ Offering services and resources that were relevant and helpful to job seekers with disabilities.

For example, *Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model (HWIM)*, implemented by Mercy Healthcare Foundation in Missouri, created a dedicated disability task force that was instrumental in educating managers and staff about hiring people with disabilities. The task force also had myriad other duties that resulted in outreach to job seekers with disabilities, creating new positions for people with disabilities, and assisting with the transition to employment. *HWIM* also used a Pathways to Employment program where interns could gain skills and later transition to employment within one of the participating hospitals. *HWIM* also included a concerted effort to improve the organizational culture in the hospital network relative to hiring and retaining people with disabilities. The program had a clear work plan and built on prior work in a similar vein, which likely aided its success. As noted in its final report:

The HWIM program model is contributing to a more diversified and disability-friendly work environment where workers with disabilities are feeling more comfortable to self-disclose their disabilities, co-workers with disabilities have easy access to resources so they can feel more comfortable working with people with disabilities, and job seekers with disabilities are being recruited, trained, and hired for jobs within the Mercy Healthcare system.

¹⁷ These programs were: *Career Success*, *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network*, *Financial Access Inclusion and Resources*, *Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model*, and *Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth*.

The *Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth (READY)* program, led by Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago in Illinois, doubled down on the concept of individualized support and incorporated a person-centered approach throughout its entire implementation process. Program staff created a personal advancement plan with each student and set clear goals for students. Key collaborations within Chicago helped the program achieve success and created a robust resource network for students with disabilities seeking to either pursue further education or enter a career.

The *Career Success* program, implemented by the Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas, also included a highly individualized approach to support, with a strength-focused approach to vocational rehabilitation. Assisting clients with job searches and job applications included a focus on identifying and building on a client's strengths and how to project their strengths. Training staff to understand the myriad resources available and to create customized job readiness programs is a time-consuming and expensive model, and staff turnover was an issue for the *Career Success* program. When staff left the program, there was considerable effort put into training new staff.

The *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network*,¹⁸ implemented by Easterseals DC/MD/VA in Maryland, leveraged systems already in place to meet employment outcomes. It created and maintained crucial collaborations with local disability service agencies and used the existing Ticket to Work program to employ job seekers with disabilities. The program also used job counselors and job readiness services to tailor resources and supports to individual job seeker needs.

The *Financial Access Inclusion and Resources (FAIR)* program, implemented by Disability Rights Louisiana, included a highly successful service – financial coaching – that job seekers found relevant and helpful. It fulfilled a common need among the *FAIR* constituency and offered individualized help for those pursuing employment.

Educating Employer Staff and Maintaining Support Through Onboarding. Aside from these five programs and the commonalities that led to their success, other common successful strategies included outreach to and education for hiring managers within target employers. If hiring managers were aware of the program and educated on its goals and approach, it was easier to place program participants into employment there. Having a dedicated, full-time staff member embedded within the hiring organization seemed to increase the likelihood of placement and retention. The *Upbound at Work* program, led by Autism Alliance of Michigan, found there were higher employment retention rates if barriers to employment were addressed before hiring, and if the applicants were properly vetted. Assessments and meetings were conducted with job seekers before recommending them for a position, and program staff maintained communication and support throughout the onboarding process.

What did successful programs have in common? Were there commonalities across various successful program elements (even if the program itself did not meet its intended targets)?

Collaborative Working Environments and High Staff Morale. Collaborations that were successful in serving program participants with disabilities included those that maintained supportive and collaborative team environments, incorporated the use of technology in program implementation, and adopted effective communication strategies. The culture of the *WorkVT 2.0* program led by HireAbility Vermont (formerly known as the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation), where staff members were equally valued and respected, contributed to a greater sense of support among both program staff and participants. Operating under a shared goal of serving program participants made staff members feel more competent in performing work tasks and regularly identifying and addressing needs. In addition, positive staff morale made participants feel comfortable asking for help when needed and put them at ease during staff interactions.

¹⁸ This program was also referred to as the *Easter Seals Staffing Network*.



Staff of the *Career Pathway Services* program, which was implemented by the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Coalition, also appreciated working in a team-based environment where their concerns were heard and addressed. After expressing concerns about increasingly demanding workloads and limited capacity, additional counselors were hired to reduce worker stress. Being able to transition to a lower caseload led to a greater feeling of self-efficacy among program staff, as they felt better able to adequately handle their work responsibilities. Employing multiple staff who were trained to collaborate on specific program initiatives also proved to be useful in connecting to individuals with disabilities. Assigning teams to address

individual issues affecting people with disabilities ensured the gathering of extensive data on population barriers, concerns, and current needs. The team-based culture of the *Career Pathway Services* program made staff feel better equipped to spend the necessary time and effort to gather detailed information. Kessler Foundation-funded programs with cooperative professional environments were more successful in addressing the unique needs of individuals with disabilities by improving staff and participant abilities and experiences.

Technology Use. To expand a program's reach and impact, staff across a number of Kessler Foundation-funded programs identified ways to use technology for participant engagement. The *Virtual Work and Supports* program, led by the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities, successfully implemented virtual programming despite a change in institution and grant location to a different state.¹⁹ Not having to worry about moving physical resources and program materials or losing access to a state-based audience positively affected staff productivity and helped ease some of the logistical challenges associated with grant relocations.

Apart from reducing challenges associated with relocation, incorporating virtual technology also benefited program participants at a time when employers were increasingly receptive to expanding their remote workforce. To reduce risk and exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies found ways to continue workplace operations by transitioning from in-person to mostly virtual activities. As described in the *Virtual Work and Supports* program report, running the program at a time when more employers were "...open to, and interested in, having individuals join their workforce in virtual ways...[was] uniquely valuable for people with disabilities." Being able to perform work tasks from one's own home helped ease many disabled participants' concerns and fears about entering the workforce. As members of a group that often faces barriers and challenges with being accepted and accommodated in professional settings, knowing that virtual options were available made individuals more receptive to the program.

Similar to the *Virtual Work and Supports* program, service coordinators in the *Road to Employment* program also expressed a need and appreciation for virtual technology use. (*Road to Employment* was implemented by Jewish Employment and Vocational Services [JEVS] Human Services in Pennsylvania.) In response to participant feedback, staff training shifted from being administered in person to being administered virtually. Being able to engage in skill-building activities like role playing and group discussions via virtual platforms made agency staff feel more comfortable working with clients who were interested in remote work positions. The program's virtual component ensured that staff training activities were conducted in a convenient and efficient manner.

Implementing virtual programming particularly benefited efforts to reach rural and native disabled groups in a cost-effective and timely fashion. *Virtual Work and Supports* staff were successful in reaching and retaining participants with disabilities in hard-to-reach or disadvantaged areas. Not having to physically travel to facilitate program activities

¹⁹ The program was originally known as *Just in Time Employment Supports* and was then led by the Midwest Disability Employment Consortium at the University of Iowa.

relieved some of the common resource and capacity struggles associated with accessing these types of areas. Offering a virtual employment support program tailored to persons with disabilities reduced access barriers and prevented individuals with disabilities from missing opportunities for employment and other assistance. Implementing a virtual program helped eliminate potential added costs in time and transportation, prevented program setbacks, and addressed existing disparities in access to employment supports between people with disabilities and general populations. In addition, this program and others with virtual support services were implemented prior to the pandemic, which meant virtual procedures and processes were already established when the pandemic moved many activities to a remote format. These virtual supports then became standard operating procedures and processes for this and other organizations that incorporated technology-based support services.

Furthermore, the use of technology presented an opportunity for professional skill development among program staff. Job coaches in the *Virtual Work and Supports* program realized they were struggling with technology and participated in specialized training. After the training, program staff delivered services effectively and competently. In many ways, technology use helped program staff improve their professional capabilities while simultaneously expanding program capacity and impact. Successful implementation of the *Virtual Work and Supports* program at a time when employers and individuals with disabilities had increased demand for digital technology use led to high future expectations for program sustainability. Program staff felt optimistic about being able to continue the program with adequate funding following the Kessler Foundation grant period.

Virtual literacy development also contributed to program sustainability for the *Road to Employment* program. *Road to Employment* included digital literacy as part of staff training to show service coordinators how to use Zoom and Microsoft Office, and how to perform online administrative tasks. Staff appreciated receiving the additional instruction and were eager to share their new knowledge with clients. The positive response to ongoing technical assistance contributed to program sustainability, as program leaders realized that this component will be useful for future successful implementation. And because this program was implemented prior to the pandemic, these supports were already in place and standard operating procedure, which created less disruption when the pandemic began.

Effective Communication. A key component of successful Kessler Foundation-funded programs was proper and effective communication strategies between program staff, stakeholders, and participants. A significant part of the *Inclusive Pathways* program's success was attributed to ongoing and intentional communication during program implementation delays and staff changes. (*Inclusive Pathways* was implemented by the Anixter Center in Illinois.) Program leaders prioritized holding regular meetings with different members of partner teams for continued contact and engagement. This ensured that program stakeholders were equally aware of program status and goals, and gave program partners the opportunity to share input on challenges faced during the program. Hosting these meetings ensured a successful program recovery following staff turnover and unforeseen circumstances related to the pandemic.

Participants from the *WorkVT 2.0* program also greatly appreciated the effective communication strategies used by program staff. Individuals involved in the program enjoyed the regular feedback, support, and guidance provided to them by program staff. Receiving comprehensive counseling and relevant advice made program participants feel better equipped to pursue and navigate their career paths. Consistent and clear communication improved participants' perceptions of their career options and inspired them to focus on their strengths and abilities.

How did program staff's prior experience implementing workforce programs (or piloting the evaluated program) affect their ability to implement the evaluated program? Did prior experience increase the likelihood of programmatic/overall success?

Decreased Implementation Time. Several programs had either been piloted previously, incorporated program elements that had been used in previous pilots, incorporated elements that already existed and were in use at other agencies or organizations, or were implemented by program staff with prior experience directly related to the program. Organizations or staff with prior experience had an easier time implementing the program in a timely manner. For example, JEVS used its subsidiary organization, hireAbility, to speed implementation of *Road to Employment* by using its expertise in disability employment, employment support services, and retention expertise. JEVS did not need to recreate these elements, which helped speed up implementation time. For the *HWIM* program, Mercy Hospitals already had a previously developed unconscious bias training, which was modified to focus specifically on the needs of individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Modifying a program already in existence reduced implementation time.



Increased Likelihood of Successful Program Elements. Programs with staff that had prior experience with the disability population greatly increased the likelihood of success. A *Bridging the Gap College to Careers* program member was previously in a position focused on student-veterans, which greatly strengthened the capacity to launch the program quickly. (*Bridging the Gap College to Careers* was implemented by Stand Among Friends and Policyworks, Inc. in Florida.) As the school-certifying official for veterans' benefits, this staff member had knowledge of the student-veteran population and was well situated to conduct outreach and begin directing program participants toward available resources and services, including the new *Bridging the Gap College to Careers* career counseling component specifically aimed at helping veterans find meaningful work.

Staff Prior Experience Did Not Guarantee Program Success. However, prior experience among program staff in either implementing workforce programs or piloting the funded program did not necessarily lead to successful program implementation or outcomes. *Bridging the Gap College to Careers* was based on a curriculum that was developed and piloted under an earlier Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant, but difficulty in securing higher education institutions to partner with slowed implementation. In addition, shifting goals in the state led to a de-emphasis in immediate employment for participants. Combined, these issues led to the program not meeting its employment goals. Similarly, the *Career Pathways* program used a highly successful customized employment process to provide a wide array of client-centered services to improve the employment outcomes of participants, but the program was still unsuccessful in meeting its employment goals. Program staff experienced challenges in helping participants overcome employment barriers because many cases were highly complex. For this reason, moving participants from vocational rehabilitation to employment took considerably longer than anticipated. Finally, staff turnover and challenges securing or maintaining collaborations often overshadowed prior experience and caused delays, or decreased the likelihood of successful implementation or outcomes.

In some cases, prior piloting or staff experience was detrimental to program implementation or outcomes. The Arc of the United States in Washington, DC experienced this with its *JusticeWorks* program. Because the program had gone through previous iterations, it was difficult to locate law enforcement offices that had not already provided officers for training, complicating collaboration recruitment efforts. Secondly, there were negative perceptions of The Arc of the United States held by some law enforcement officers that were challenging for program staff to overcome.

What role did organizational capacity play in implementation and likelihood of success? Which specific issues with resources challenged programmatic success?

Low Organizational Capacity Led to Decreased Success in Some Program Elements. The *Inclusive Pathways* program illustrates differences in organizational capacity and the resulting impact on the program's ultimate success at its two hospital implementation sites. The program included a dedicated, full-time disability inclusion coordinator who was embedded within each hiring organization. Interview participants consistently pointed to this position as a key component of the program that led to successful outcomes and agreed that without a dedicated, full-time staff member to focus on this work, progress would not have been possible. However, differences in organizational capacity between hospitals created a situation where one hospital could retain its disability inclusion coordinator and the other hospital could not. Although both hospitals expressed interest in continuing the position, one hospital experienced dire financial concerns resulting from the pandemic as well as a lack of buy-in or perceived value of the program among leadership, which led to uncertainty about long-term sustainability of the position.

Low Organizational Capacity Caused Hiring and Retention Problems. Another issue related to organizational capacity that affected several programs was the inability of organizations to offer competitive salaries for program staff. This made it difficult to hire and retain staff or require the time needed from staff to adequately implement the program. Staff turnover was problematic, creating delays in implementation and/or lower-than-expected employment outcomes. Some programs experienced multiple personnel changes that affected their capacity to implement the scope of work as proposed. Overworked program staff was a related problem. One program evaluation report noted that staff had the expertise to analyze program data but did not have the time because the task competed with the day-to-day responsibilities of their jobs. Program management, record-keeping, and data collection issues can result in less-than-ideal or unusable program information with which to measure success. Clearly defined roles and expectations of program staff, or program staff dedicated specifically to these areas, can help this type of situation.

Low Organizational Capacity Increased Program Staff Time Spent on Program Elements. Another challenge involved staff often needing to spend large amounts of time to adequately address the needs of program participants. Multiple programs had intensive program elements focused on the individual needs of participants. Although these intensive services can contribute to high retention rates of employees, they are costly to organizations. If the organization already consists of specialists or has embedded staff who understand the program population and are adept at accessing services, it can avoid or offset some of these costs. For example, in addition to navigators for community resources, *Upbound at Work* utilized specialists to assist program participants with a range of issues relative to obtaining and sustaining a job such as benefits, housing, and transportation. The program included an insurance specialist to help evaluate benefits with job offers, which can be confusing to new employees, especially when considering Medicaid and Social Security Insurance benefit cliffs and how those may or may not be covered by new private insurance. *Upbound at Work* also included a community resource specialist who helped participants with a range of auxiliary supports, including budgeting, finding the right therapist, community activities, and navigating parental relationships as program participants became more independent. These specialists provided critical long-term supports to new participants, as



well as those who found employment, to ensure retention. However, for an organization that does not already have these staff resources, they can be too costly to employ.

Some programs found it helpful to employ staff or repurpose existing staff who had business experience to focus on building and sustaining corporate collaborations. Other programs found that developing strategic collaborations with organizations that had experience in areas program staff lacked was highly beneficial. This is one particular way that organizations can avoid having to hire additional staff or train existing staff. A good example of this was the *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network*,

which used the Ticket to Work program in a strategic and entrepreneurial way. *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network's* strengths were job search assistance and job placement, but it also worked to partner with disability-related services organizations whose expertise was more broadly associated with vocational rehabilitation services. *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* also hired staff who were already trained and had a deep understanding of how the Ticket to Work program functioned. This staffing arrangement positioned *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* well to recoup financial resources available through the Social Security Administration by having staff who could expertly file the necessary paperwork and documentation required to receive compensation from Social Security. *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* also worked to foster relationships with providers in Ticket to Work employment networks to create mutually beneficial collaborations that built on each of their organizational strengths.

Low Organizational Capacity Led to Reliance on External Support. Some organizations had highly complex bureaucratic processes that were difficult to navigate in the relatively short funding time frame, even for those programs that received no-cost extensions. For example, the *NYC: ATWORK* program, implemented by the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, experienced significant delays with hiring staff because of New York City's bureaucratic hiring and onboarding process. Complexity in program design similarly led to increased implementation time for the *21 and Able Employment/Career Transition* program (hereafter referred to as *21 and Able*), which was led by United Way of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania. *21 and Able* initially struggled to get its embedded career transition professionals on board and in place. Some programs also had to raise external funds to justify hiring staff for program implementation, which was time consuming. There is certainly a benefit to programs having the organizational capacity and resources in place to be independent of the need for outside funding.

What elements led to successful collaborations? In what ways did collaborations affect program implementation? In what circumstances did collaborations create elements of programmatic success? In what ways did collaborations lead to the employment of people with disabilities?

Collaborations Varied and Were Instrumental to Program Success. While all the funded programs were implemented using some type of collaboration, the nature of those collaborations varied in their structural complexity and level of effectiveness for operating the program, which contributed to the program's objectives being met or not during the program period. There were also fundamental differences between programs that sought to forge new collaborations through the Kessler Foundation grant and programs that already had a collaborative relationship among the implementers that they planned to leverage for reaching the proposed employment outcomes. However, thematic analysis of the data revealed that some programs developed successful collaborations that led to programmatic success despite not reaching their targets for the employment of people with disabilities. That is, some programs emphasized development of the collaboration as an important outcome, through which the program aimed to stimulate systemic changes that could endure beyond the two-year grant program.

Clear Roles, Effective Communication, and Strategic Coordination Led to Successful Collaborations. Elements that led to successful collaborations had clear delineation of each partner's role in the initiative, effective communication among the partnering entities, and strategic coordination to plan and implement the programmatic activities. Collaborations showing weaknesses in these areas tended to have delays in launching one or more components of the program, less buy-in from one or more partners, or other shortcomings that adversely affected what was accomplished by the end of the grant funding, whereas collaborations that were strongly grounded in those key elements had more success with their respective programs.

An example of a particularly successful collaboration was *HWIM*, which used a model based on the four pillars of education – education, training and development, employment, and awareness and empowerment. Within those components were a suite of program offerings that included train-to-hire internships and volunteerism as two pathways to employment as well as training and events to improve workplace culture around disability inclusion for all employees in the Mercy Healthcare system. The program benefited from a task force for communication and coordination as well as leadership, and its membership size was scaled down mid-stream to make the task force more effective. *HWIM* met or exceeded all of its outcome goals, and it received unanimous support from all parties who provided feedback. The final report for *HWIM* indicated that there were 745 hires and a high likelihood for sustainability of the program.

Another program with hospitals as collaborators, *Inclusive Pathways* illustrated how having key elements in place led to successful collaborations. Although *Inclusive Pathways* encountered challenges in its first year that included turnover in leadership and the disability inclusion coordinator role (as well as the effects of the pandemic), by its final year, the placement of new staff into those roles resulted in a strengthened collaboration and reaching most of the programmatic goals. Having ongoing communication, which included regularly scheduled meetings for subgroups and the full collaboration, ensured agreement on program goals and strategies and offered opportunities to share challenges and find solutions. All staff and partners discussed an appreciation for the formal governing strategies that had been put in place when their perspectives were sought by the program evaluator.

Collaborations Helped Some Programs Achieve Elements of Success Even When Outcomes Were Not Met. For the *Inclusive Pathways* program, collaborations created elements of programmatic success even when the employment goal was not met by the end of the program period. The *Inclusive Pathways* program did not quite reach its target for 40 new hires during the program period but came very close with 39 job offers extended to participants. Of the 39 job offers, 33 individuals accepted and were placed into employment. Job offers that were not accepted were due to vaccine mandates, preference to stay in school and continue transition services, and accepting other job offers, all situations beyond the control of the program.

Some Programs Focused on Collaborations as an Outcome. Some programs had a strong focus on building the collaboration as an outcome of the initiative. That objective is evident with the *Just in Time Employment Supports* program.²⁰ This collaboration model was premised on the capacity of three University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, each operating a different program independently through their state systems in Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, to use technology-based approaches to expand the reach of job coaches and virtual networks to give support to job coaches. This program aimed to strengthen the collaboration in each state for implementing a pilot program of technology-based service as its primary component. The pilot program was found to be positive, useful, and successful for knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving after one year of implementation. In contrast, the *Just in Time Employment Supports* program's goal of building a larger consortium across the states failed to launch due to a lack of focus and purpose that program members described as being very challenging for engagement in that component.

²⁰ As mentioned previously, this program was later known as *Virtual Work and Supports* when program management shifted from Iowa to Arizona.

A different program that aimed for broad impact was more successful in leveraging its collaboration toward that end. The *Maryland Customized Employment Project*, led by Seeking Employment, Equality, and Community for People with Developmental Disabilities in Maryland, engaged the participating organizations to focus on statewide policy changes to address core barriers to employment for people with disabilities and successfully reached that goal.

Some Programs Focused on Collaborations to Develop Programmatic Components. Other programs used collaborations successfully to develop key components of their program for serving people with disabilities either directly or indirectly through the program's goals. An example of the latter is *JusticeWorks'* Pathways to Justice[®] component, a training program for first responders and criminal justice professionals to improve awareness of people with disabilities and proper response techniques. The collaboration in this program was strengthened by preparing the training and, despite limited success with other components, 94% of the 141 participants who completed the Pathways to Justice[®] training had improved scores in a statistically significant finding from the data analysis.

The *FAIR* program illustrated how established collaborations strengthen the capacity of program staff to offer a wide range of supports to participants from the state's population of formerly incarcerated individuals with disabilities. *FAIR* relied heavily on referrals from its collaborators and connections to numerous organizations across Louisiana to assist program participants with issues that presented barriers to employment, such as legal problems and financial instability, through access to free legal services and financial coaching to help with debt reduction, set-aside savings, and credit score improvements. *FAIR* also offered some financial assistance to program participants to mitigate instability. Through its successful collaboration, the *FAIR* program exceeded its recruitment goal by about 10% through referrals and met its employment goal of helping at least half of the participants actively seeking work to obtain employment, with 76% of those retaining their jobs for more than 90 days.



How did trust among participants/consumers affect implementation of the program? How did perceptions of trust affect the program's overall success?

Some Programs Leveraged Trust and Empathy to Address Participant Barriers. Kessler Foundation programs that incorporated practices for building trust and empathy made participants feel more confident in their work abilities. Several participants in the *NYC: ATWORK* program described feeling more comfortable entering the professional workforce due to the positive encouragement and care from program staff. They felt that program staff took adequate time to understand individual goals and interests to recommend the best assistive tools and strategies for their career journeys. Some participants were pleasantly surprised to experience this close sense of connection after dealing with hostile and discriminatory past experiences based on disability status. Not feeling judged and being treated with respect and dignity made participants feel more engaged in the program and their career paths.

Individuals with disabilities in the *Career Success* program also appreciated staff trustworthiness. Program participants enjoyed working with staff who took their experiences and needs into account and instilled a sense of agency and independence. Participants felt that the program staff set positive aspirational examples of leadership through fostering trust and empathy. Participants felt a sense of emotional and psychological safety discussing their personal challenges. For example, one participant credited his improved social skills to working with *Career Success* program staff who made him feel safe enough to share his issues comfortably interacting with family and church members. Establishing relationships with program participants based on trust and empathy made participants learn necessary skills for personal and professional development.

Trust Increased the Likelihood of Successful Programmatic Outcomes. In programs like *Combat2Careers*, being able to restore trust among program participants following initial program delays ultimately contributed to the program's success. (*Combat2Careers* was implemented by the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University.) Trust was also something that program staff purposely worked to build and felt the program would not be successful without. The program's final evaluation report noted that program staff were "acutely aware of the need to establish trust" between staff and participants.

Trust was Essential in Building Successful Employer Collaborations. In addition to gaining the trust of program participants, Kessler Foundation partners who gained the trust of employers were more successful in finding job opportunities. In the *NYC: ATWORK* program, employers expressed high satisfaction with the program staff's ability to identify and refer ideal employee candidates. In addition to adequately supporting and training individuals seeking assistance with employment, program staff ensured that participants were placed in ideal working environments. Building mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders and program participants based on trust made this program successful in expanding and empowering the workforce of people with disabilities.

What barriers prevented successful implementation? In what ways did barriers prevent the employment of people with disabilities?

Participant Reluctance to Disclose Disabilities or Engage in Full-Time Employment. A number of programs experienced unanticipated reluctance by participants to either self-identify as having a disability or engage in full-time employment. In some cases, participants would lose some benefits if they were hired full time, creating reluctance among participants to engage in full-time work. The *Career Pathway Services* program, for example, found that older youth with disabilities had to forego transition services to participate in the program, leaving participants to weigh the benefits of potentially being hired by a hospital against the risk of losing their transition services. The program was initially unprepared to address this type of benefits counseling with participants and had to adjust and tailor its counseling for participants in this age group.

The *Combat2Careers* program discovered that potential participants were reluctant to disclose conditions that interfered with their ability to function well in school and life more generally. And those who did disclose their disability were sometimes overwhelmed by their needs by the time they sought help and had difficulty staying in the program. There was evidence that program participants, who were veterans, were uncomfortable sharing their disabilities and discussing the types of supports that might benefit them. The *Combat2Careers* program's final evaluation report stated that was the case for nearly a quarter (24.1%) of the program's candidates at the State University of New York at Oswego site, with four individuals disclosing their disabilities in an unspecified way and an additional three people preferring not to respond at all. Similar proportions of male and female veterans opted not to specify or respond about disabling conditions. Across this group of *Combat2Careers* candidates, fewer than half (11 out of 29, or 40%) mentioned a specific disability that the program potentially could have helped to address through provision of resources and referrals. That subset included individuals whose profiles indicated that they had "used campus services" for assistance with accessibility issues. Thus, most individuals who were "most active" in the *Combat2Careers* program were primarily seeking counseling and/or support services related to their career development in the civilian workforce, without much, if any, focus on disability-related counseling and support services. Program recruitment was also challenging, as potential participants were reluctant to self-disclose their disabilities and seek assistance from counselors.

The *Road to Employment* program also encountered challenges recruiting participants as it was difficult to convey the potential benefits of employment to applicants and their family members who were concerned about losing disability assistance. Program staff employed the help of a disability service agency with staff trained as employment ambassadors to educate potential participants and their families about the benefits of full-time employment. All of these issues caused delays in implementation.

COVID-19. The pandemic clearly caused significant challenges for the programs where the implementation period overlapped with the pandemic. Recruitment was an issue for most of these programs, partly because in-person recruitment or recruitment events were not an option. *Combat2Careers* found in-person recruitment efforts were far more effective, especially because counselors felt they needed to build trust over multiple visits to engage potential participants. One counselor spoke of her preference for in-person interactions where she could “actually hand people materials” as she spoke with them. The curtailment of in-person interactions on the two partner campuses compounded an already difficult task.

The pandemic also created recruitment barriers because many potential participants were reluctant to risk infection to work. People with disabilities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and potential participants were not looking for work due to health risks and other complications, including changes in public transportation and support services as well as some individuals choosing not to take advantage of services because of the expanded unemployment benefits and the stipend provided to them by the federal government.



The *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* faced challenges finding jobs for participants who were interested in working during the pandemic. The program sought positions such as temperature checkers, shopping cart sanitizers, contact tracers, and security jobs at pandemic response centers. Overall, however, there were fewer job opportunities available to job seekers with disabilities throughout the pandemic.

Participants Often Had Needs Beyond What the Programs Could Address. Many programs found participants had complex needs and multiple barriers to employment. *NYC:*

ATWORK program staff said, “The biggest issue is that job seekers are not prepared.” *FAIR* program staff reported a lack of social support, technology proficiency, access to reliable transportation, and housing were the common barriers to reentry and financial literacy faced by most of its program participants. Social support and other similar needs were particularly challenging for participants because they were issues participants had little control over. Program staff felt participants have “built up protective shells that disabled them to build social support.” *WorkVT 2.0* program staff found participants encountered issues beyond their disabilities, necessitating comprehensive support that they were unable to provide. Staff for *Upbound at Work* noted that identifying and addressing participants’ barriers to employment was often time-consuming and, in some cases, the program found it difficult to form deep collaborations with employers because they could not leverage groups of job-ready participants. Staff across a few programs felt participants needed additional financial assistance outside what the respective program could offer. Funding for transportation, clothing, or housing was often needed. *FAIR* program staff noted they would have a budget for such needs in the future. The *Warrior Bridge* program, implemented by ServiceSource in Florida, found that participants’ time in the program before securing employment far exceeded their initial estimates. Participants had greater needs in areas of social integration, self-discovery, and work goals, and the incremental approach to employment readiness did not result in as many job placements as the program expected. The *Warrior Bridge* final report stated that “the most critical challenge the *Warrior Bridge* program faced, and the key lesson it learned, was that it often takes an inordinate amount of time to get individuals with traumatic brain injuries to employment.”

Misalignment of Participants' and Program Goals. In several cases, program goals did not align with the goals of participants, which created delays and, in some circumstances, shifts in programmatic goals or recruitment. A primary goal of the *FAIR* program was to improve the financial literacy of participants, but participants were more focused on addressing outstanding legal issues and increasing their income. In addition, the program received many referrals of individuals who were only interested in assistance with enrolling in disability benefits and not in seeking employment. Eventually, *FAIR* program staff shifted recruitment messaging to include that participants must be willing to begin employment activities within three months of receiving services.

Implementation Delays. Several programs experienced delays in implementation and longer-than-expected "ramp-up" times. Programs that required immediate employer engagement and investment and/or required specialized staff encountered a longer implementation period. The *21 and Able* program, for example, required employer investment and early engagement, and required specialized counselors embedded within the employer organization. Implementation lagged while employers willing to invest were identified, and while staff were brought on board and oriented. In addition, the two participating employers offered mostly full-time positions, but *21 and Able* program participants (and many job seekers with disabilities) preferred part-time positions. A major challenge became identifying sufficient numbers of part-time jobs. The jobs available at both employers were mostly entry-level positions, but a number of participants had work experience, and some had high levels of education, meaning there was a mismatch between participants' employment desires and available jobs. It took time to identify positions that were more in line with some participants' experience. Slow bureaucratic processes and approvals also hindered the implementation of several programs. Hiring and embedding specialized staff, paperwork, background checks, multiple state agency approvals, higher education institutional processes, and organizational policies all slowed implementation and, in many cases, were outside of the control of program staff.

Staff Turnover and Limited Staff Time. Finding and retaining program staff was a common challenge for Kessler Foundation grantees. There were many instances of staff turnover among program staff, in associated staff embedded within employers, or among partner organizations. In several cases, staff turnover resulted in the loss of collaborations because the relationship hinged on the individual and dissolved when they left. The *Inclusive Pathways* program experienced implementation delays due to frequent high-level staff turnover. *Upbound at Work's* original program manager resigned in the middle of the second year of the grant, which may have had an impact on organizational relationships maintained by this individual. A vacant program officer position in the *21 and Able* program negatively affected collaborations and placements. The *Works Job Club* program, implemented by Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc. in Texas, struggled to develop curriculum and complete program development because of turnover and family leave among staff. One of the program's partners also had turnover in the primary contact position, resulting in delays and affecting the program's ability to create long-term placements within the grant period. The *Career Success* program lost all its staff shortly after the implementation period began, and the entire program had to be rebuilt.

Many staff also had full caseloads and were unable to commit the time necessary to fulfilling training or other program requirements in a timely manner. Some programs, such as the *Maryland Customized Employment Project*, had difficult and complex training and some staff were unable to keep up with the advanced requirements. New staff at the *Career Success* program needed extensive training to administer a program component, which required time and recontracting with the trainer. Supported employment specialists for the program reported they had to engage in multiple types of training, including an ongoing eight-week course with units and modules to learn about the individual placement and support model for supported employment. *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* program staff reported that the use of the Ticket to Work program was a bureaucratic hardship for many agencies. The paperwork was overly burdensome, and the program regulations and requirements were complex and difficult to navigate. In addition, to be a Ticket to Work provider, staff had to be trained and certified by the Social Security Administration, a resource-intensive professional development requirement. The *Virtual Reality Job Interview Training* program, implemented by the University of

Michigan, sought to embed a virtual reality tool in high schools but faced systematic issues when schools were reluctant to commit the time, energy, and resources required for implementation. Limited teacher time and curriculum space made administrators hesitant to engage in the program.

Overambitious and Complex Program Goals. A few of the grantees proposed complex programs with multiple or extremely ambitious goals. These programs struggled to meet all of their goals or ran into issues with slow or long implementation periods. Program staff for *Inclusive Pathways*, for example, described the program as “trying to tackle too many issues.” The program included not only impact goals for job seekers with disabilities in the healthcare sector, but also for job seekers within the justice system. The two populations had different needs, goals, and employers, thus creating a complex implementation process. The screening and hiring process was also quite different, leading to the need for increased program staff and multitasking. Hiring processes, placements, organizational training, barrier reduction, and the associated needs of two populations were a lot for program staff to handle.

Complex program goals also tended to slow the hiring process, which resulted in other challenges. *Inclusive Pathways* had a process in which participants worked individually with counselors embedded in the hiring organization to reduce barriers and prepare for employment. However, other organizations could place their job seekers directly into employment at the same hospitals without using the *Inclusive Pathways* program. Although these organizations recognized the benefit of the program model, their primary concern was quickly employing people, which was difficult to do through the more complex and ambitious program.

Another highly complicated program goal proposed by multiple grantees involved organizational culture change. Many programs contained elements meant to address employers' biases or preconceived ideas about hiring people with disabilities. A staff member at *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* referred to changing employers' mindsets as “poking holes in their preconceived notions about people with disabilities.” *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* worked to shift employers' thinking around disability hiring, so as not to see disability hiring as a charitable endeavor but to view people with disabilities as a pool of workers with a different set of abilities that are beneficial to their workplace. Changing organizational culture is complex and takes time. Attempting such complicated issues is difficult within a two-year implementation time frame.



Lack of Communication Between Partners. Some programs experienced miscommunication that slowed or complicated implementation efforts. For example, the *NYC: ATWORK* program encountered significant communication barriers relaying information about the needs of employers to the diverse set of service providers within its talent coalition. In addition, the program experienced difficulty aligning the job skill level expectations of the business council with the talent coalition's expectations. For example, one staff member described how job seekers referred from service providers who had high levels of professional education were seeking lower-level jobs because service providers told them that is what employers would expect of them. Program staff worked to change this misconception by ensuring service providers and employers were posting high-level positions on the job board.

Technology Issues. Several programs included technology integration as a primary goal. The *Just in Time Employment Supports* program proposed to integrate an iPad-based tool with job coaches. *Works Job Club* and *Virtual Work and Supports* both sought to expand on and integrate virtual job coaching strategies. Several other programs sought to integrate technology-based toolkits with educators or counselors. While many of these elements were reportedly useful, the learning curve was steep for many program staff or partners. *Just in Time Employment Supports* staff reported that asking job coaches to use a new form of technology required that they change how they normally do their job. Some job coaches and direct service staff expressed a lack of comfortability in using new technologies. The program implemented bimonthly meetings with job coaches to provide support and found that to be valuable. Program staff also found some job coaches – those more comfortable with technology use – already used their own personal technology and devices, so the program needed to examine what types of devices individuals already had and teach them to use those devices for job coaching purposes. The pilot was also delayed because of Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)-related issues and getting the iPads to comply with these regulations. In addition, one technology service provider dropped out of the program and a new provider came on board, which caused delays.

A lack of Internet and technology access also created challenges for those programs where technology usage was expected of program participants. *Works Job Club* was well suited to fully virtual services, which were convenient during the pandemic, but some program participants lacked Internet access and the program did not have the funding to provide participants with the resources they needed to access the Internet.

Another issue with embedding technologies in programs was the recent nationwide and international focus on data privacy and protection as well as recent media attention about the negative effects of different technologies on individuals and society. Programs proposing technology use should consider this prior to implementation and offer appropriate working groups, technology support, and conversations around institutional policies and practices.

In what ways did program staff innovate through and overcome challenges?

Changing or Adding Employers. Challenges necessitate the need to innovate and overcome, and Kessler Foundation programs in most cases did just that. Many programs had to find new or additional employer partners. The *Meaningful Jobs* program, led by May Institute and Work Inc. in Massachusetts, faced a major setback when initial goals to place participants in jobs within the Transportation Security Administration failed. Participants were unable to pass the Transportation Security Administration employment exam despite much training, and the Transportation Security Administration was unable to provide information regarding why applicants failed the test. This resulted in *Meaningful Jobs* being unable to make mid-course adjustments to its curriculum and necessitated a shift to employing participants in other similar jobs without the stringent testing component. Program staff realized that its English proficiency training, behavioral and social skills training, and the support and assistance in the application and job interviewing process were still valuable services for participants who sought employment with employers outside the Transportation Security Administration. Therefore, the program expanded its outreach to employers outside the Transportation Security Administration and worked to employ participants elsewhere. Similarly, *Upbound at Work* originally planned to work only with automotive industry employers. However, hiring freezes among the initial employers forced program staff to pivot and expand to other industries and employers.

Changing the Program Model or Refocusing Efforts. Unanticipated challenges forced several programs to rethink their program model or elements of the model, or to refocus their efforts around recruitment and collaboration. *Bridging the Gap College to Careers* experienced several challenges, including a lack of institutional commitment to the program caused by turnover, communication issues, the size of the institutions, campus politics, and leadership commitments, which led to difficulties in sustaining the program model. For these reasons, *Bridging the Gap College to Careers* deviated from the original model in some cases. Components of the program model, however, were regarded

as successful and program staff continued to work on expanding their use and transferability. Content from the program curriculum was also used to create a new training course, Peer Mentoring Works, using an online platform.

The *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* was able to refocus when its staff realized that the business development component of its original plan was not working as intended. The program was not able to convince local employers to partner with it to receive job orders from employers that the *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* would then fill by recruiting and sourcing candidates for the positions. Employers were not willing to pay for the service because they "didn't want to pay for resources, didn't see the value, or couldn't afford it." An *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* staff member also explained that despite attempts to educate the employers, they couldn't overcome the hesitancy of the employer not wanting to be liable for making accommodations and the employer's fear of possibly having to fire individuals with disabilities. Due to not being able to secure employers that were willing to pay for this service, and with the loss of funding and partners, the *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* chose to refocus its efforts on the Ticket to Work employer network.



Making Mid-Stream Adjustments. Program staff who were agile and willing to make changes quickly were able to overcome challenges. Nearly all programs that overcame challenges also had staff who were willing to make changes, even small or incremental ones, during implementation. The *Virtual Reality Job Interview Training* program was responsive to challenges and setbacks by making substantial changes to its technology-based tool and addressing implementation issues. *21 and Able* shifted its recruiting target from high school graduates to somewhat older students due primarily to the minimum age requirements for most jobs at the initial two participating employers. The program also expanded recruitment beyond schools to social service agencies, which increased its pool of participants.

Road to Employment program staff demonstrated agility as it was able to make changes based on participant feedback to improve its program offerings. Changes were made to the training sessions based on feedback to make it more suited to participants' daily work schedules and the virtual environment. Program staff utilized informal training participant feedback and shortened or removed interactive components of the curriculum to reduce the length of the training while maintaining all of the informative content and opportunities for participants to practice their learning. Program staff also chose to incorporate digital literacy components provided by career navigators into its service offerings because of feedback from training participants. It discovered that many training participants were ultimately seeking remote jobs, but did not have the skills to apply to online jobs or work remotely. The program chose to offer digital literacy assessments and training to help prepare participants.

Virtual Reality Job Interview Training program staff adapted the program to mitigate challenges. First, they expanded and improved their recruitment strategy to engage additional states, school districts, schools, and students. The program originally set out to engage only Illinois schools but ended up engaging multiple states, which allowed program staff to cast a wide net to boost enrollment, engagement, and employment numbers. Second, program staff expanded the training from one day to two days because they were receiving feedback that there was too much information to take in and process during one day of training. Third, program staff experimented with the best method (e.g., phone, email, or a combination of both) to contact teachers to receive the most complete data. In addition, program staff added a feature that allowed teachers to see a big-picture view of their students' data and progress, which some program staff believed would incentivize teachers to collect and report data.

Hiring Additional Staff, Repurposing Existing Staff, or Leveraging Collaborations. A number of programs had to either hire additional staff beyond what was originally proposed, or pivot to either repurpose existing staff or leverage collaborations to utilize partners' staff for program-specific needs. In its first program year, the *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* faced considerable challenges with effective employer engagement. It later hired a business development staff director to improve employer engagement. The *WorkVT 2.0* program encountered difficulty with recruitment, so program staff enlisted all team members to focus on recruitment efforts, regardless of their position. Staff were tasked with conducting cold calls, in-person and virtual informational sessions, outreach to other HireAbility Vermont counselors to disseminate program information, and screening of existing HireAbility Vermont clients who might be eligible for the program. This "all-hands-on-deck" approach works best when the challenge is related only to a lack of recruitment effort, rather than other challenges that might further compound recruitment. In the case of programs where participants' employment barriers take considerable time to appropriately address, program staff who built and leveraged strong collaborations were able to speed this process to some degree. The *FAIR* program, for example, leveraged its good rapport with organizations and service providers to refer participants who needed particular services and supports.

Changing Organizational Practices. Some programs changed their organizational practices in response to challenges. *Upbound at Work* discovered that participant employment barriers often surfaced too late in the process for program staff to address them appropriately. Program staff changed their intake process, developing a comprehensive assessment and referral process on the front end, and partnered with the organization's navigator team to get participants the wraparound supports they needed. In addition, the program implemented soft handoffs to supporting agencies, ensuring clients a smooth transition.

The pandemic also created challenges that often spurred changes to organizational practices. The *FAIR* program was able to switch to a fully virtual environment easily, but program staff quickly realized that clients missed the face-to-face interaction, which made it difficult to build trust with them. Therefore, program staff increased their communication and follow-up to establish trust and increase retention. The pandemic also shifted the focus of participants from immediate employment and created a situation where they needed more than just job placement support. Most of the participants were instead focused on immediate income support, access to safe housing, and healthcare. Program staff shifted focus to helping participants find immediate income support and identify different resources and programs in the area that could help them find housing and access to healthcare.

What types of challenges were difficult to overcome?

COVID-19. Across the programs, a few challenges were most difficult for programs to overcome. At the top of the list was the COVID-19 pandemic, which suppressed hiring and caused uncertainty across the board. Recruitment stalled and most programs experienced delays in implementation. A good example of this was the *WorkVT 2.0* program, which began recruitment at the start of the pandemic, significantly affecting enrollment numbers. The pandemic created uncertainty among program participants (and anyone entering the job market), resulting in hiring freezes, and caused some job seekers hesitancy because of elevated health risks.

Participants with High Needs. Another challenge that was difficult to overcome within the resource and time constraints of the grant period was the unanticipated high needs of participants across some programs. Although program staff leveraged collaborations, added staff, changed intake processes, and increased programmatic elements, this presented a challenge for many programs that proved difficult to overcome.

Short Implementation Time Frame. It was challenging for any program to hire staff; create the program; recruit participants; build, maintain, and leverage collaborations; and place job seekers in employment within a span of two years. Compounding this for some programs was the pandemic. It is not surprising that the majority of programs did not complete their goals within the two-year grant period. Kessler Foundation provided no-cost extensions, which helped many programs achieve at least some success.



Organizational Capacity Issues and Constrained Resources.

For some organizations, limited resources greatly constrained their ability to implement their programs successfully. Because many participants had higher needs and took longer to move through programs than expected, some organizations simply could not sustain their respective programs.

Were there commonalities across various programs' challenges or barriers?

Employer Engagement. Many of the programs funded through Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grants featured engagement with employers as a core component. However, the nature of employer engagement varied across the programs and sometimes differed between or among employers that engaged with the same program. For some programs, the connection to employers was more informal and pursued on an as-needed basis once individual participants had reached a state of readiness as job seekers by progressing through the curriculum and demonstrating some self-motivation for finding paid work. Other programs more fully integrated the role of employers into the objectives for employment of people with disabilities. The following examples of programs featuring some more successful models for employer engagement illustrate the ways in which employer engagement contributed to overall programmatic success.

The *21 and Able* program utilized embedded support professionals, called career transition professionals, who provided employers with knowledgeable staff to ease the processes of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding young adults with disabilities as they transitioned from school environments to their initial work experiences. Ideally, the participating employer would choose to retain the career transition professional on staff, but, if not, the career transition professional had assurance of returning to their original job with the office of vocational rehabilitation. This embedded employment-support model had previously been used in a pilot and it became the cornerstone of the collaboration implementing *21 and Able*. Two organizations – the University of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County – were the first committed employers to join a corporate employer. Despite the long ramp-up period to get the program started, it proved to be effective at overcoming employment barriers for youth with disabilities and achieved high participant satisfaction. The initial successes helped to overcome reluctance or hesitation from other employers and led to engaging FedEx as a corporate partner and the city of Pittsburgh as a fourth employer partner by the end of the program period. The program used \$40,000 in employer funds and \$20,000 in grant funds to finance the salary of the career transition professional as an embedded position with the employer. Although that level of investment by the employer was seen as a major obstacle to participation, it also generated buy-in among participating employers that may have helped with the retention of career transition professionals. Another important factor contributing to successful employer engagement was the communication about roles within the organization. When the employer's hiring manager was informed about the program and the role of the career transition professional for embedded support, it led to synergistic interactions with other personnel that helped to integrate the program within the organization in an efficient and timely manner.

Upbound at Work used a more traditional staffing model in which employers entered into an agreement for placing job seekers into specific openings. This also was an expansion of a pilot program in which the Autism Alliance of Michigan placed individuals into positions with an automobile manufacturer (Ford) by developing relationships with one additional automotive company and five manufacturing companies for employing individuals with autism. Autism Alliance of Michigan's model led to successful employer engagement by providing a single point of contact to facilitate communication across a range of issues, which also could be addressed through a robust portfolio of wraparound services to support both employers and job seekers. Moreover, because Autism Alliance of Michigan's model was based on an assumption of confidence that individuals with autism or related disabilities were capable of performing at all levels in a company, and formulated job placement strategies based on comprehensive assessments with job seekers, the program operated to tailor the fit between person and job placement at the company. This program was affected by economic conditions with adverse impacts on the automotive industry, which hampered reaching the job placement goals. However, *Upbound at Work* was highly successful, with 100% retention of those employees placed into positions in the automobile industry. That is a remarkable statistic in disability employment.

Achieving employer engagement did not always entail a formalized relationship with program staff. Program evaluation reports revealed instances of positive feedback from employers about how the staffing program was beneficial from their perspective, which increased the likelihood of continued engagement. In the *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* program, an employer connected with program staff at a hiring event and engaged the program to fill three positions. The efforts of program staff to ensure that the candidates were a good fit for the openings resulted in the employer reporting satisfaction with all the referrals.

Another instance of successful employer engagement was *Inclusive Pathways*, which addressed recruitment and retention in the healthcare industry through a collaboration with local hospitals and nonprofits. *Inclusive Pathways* featured the role of a disability inclusion coordinator as embedded staff at the partnering hospitals in a permanent position as a direct contact to coordinate hiring, training, and onboarding, and addressing matters of workplace policy. The *Inclusive Pathways* program met most of its original goals, including nearly 40 job offers, 33 placements, 72% retention among placements, and 14 promotions.

Participant Trust. Programs that incorporated practices for building trust and empathy made participants feel more confident in their work abilities. Several *NYC: ATWORK* program participants described feeling more comfortable entering the workforce due to the positive encouragement and care from program staff. They felt that program staff took adequate time to understand individual goals and interests and to recommend the best assistive tools and strategies for their career journeys. Participants were pleasantly surprised to experience this close sense of connection after dealing with hostile and discriminatory past experiences based on disability status. Not feeling judged and being treated with respect and dignity made participants feel more engaged in the program and their career paths.

Individuals with disabilities in the *Career Success* program also appreciated staff trustworthiness. Program participants enjoyed working with staff who took their experiences and needs into account, and instilled a sense of agency and independence. Participants felt that program staff set positive aspirational examples of leadership by fostering trust and empathy. Participants felt a sense of emotional and psychological safety while discussing their personal challenges. For example, one participant credited his improved social skills to working with *Career Success* program staff who made him feel safe enough to share his issues comfortably with his family and church members. Establishing relationships with program participants based on trust and empathy made participants learn necessary skills for personal and professional development.

Employer Trust. In addition to gaining the trust of program participants, program partners that gained the trust of employers were more successful in finding job opportunities. In the *NYC: ATWORK* program, employers expressed high satisfaction with the program staff's ability to identify and refer ideal employee candidates. In addition to adequately supporting and training individuals seeking assistance with employment, *NYC: ATWORK* program staff ensured that participants were placed in ideal working environments. Building mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders and program participants based on trust made this program successful in expanding and empowering workers with disabilities.



The Role of Trust in Program Recovery. In programs like *Combat2Careers*, being able to restore trust among program participants following initial program delays ultimately contributed to the program's success. Through the dedicated work of two veteran project coordinators, the *Combat2Careers* program aimed to reach, enable, and empower veterans in need of employment. As a veteran himself, one veteran project coordinator hired to recruit and serve veterans at the State University of New York at Oswego emphasized the need for in-person interaction to facilitate trust and veteran engagement, particularly as it related to disability disclosure. Going through a period of in-person restrictions during the pandemic initially limited program capacity, but program staff still maintained a commitment to connecting with the small number of veterans that they could reach. As pandemic restrictions became more relaxed, the veteran project coordinator was able to build trust with more individuals by spending time in on-campus veteran spaces and building rapport with organizations that served veterans.

Participant Concerns About Trust. To address concerns about equal workplace treatment, some programs hired staff who communicated with both participants and employers. The *21 and Able* program employed career transition professionals who handled activities for recruitment, job matching, and assistance with pre- and post-employment affairs. In addition, program staff served as workplace advocates for participants with disabilities throughout their time of employment to identify and address any issues or adverse experiences. Being able to trust and share their experiences with career transition professionals helped relieve participant anxieties and made them feel less vulnerable to employer mistreatment. This aspect of the *21 and Able* program ultimately contributed to the successful recruitment and retention of participants with disabilities.

Conclusion

Analysis of the 21 Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant programs from 2015 to 2022 illuminate multiple findings that contribute to the larger body of lessons about how organizations can help people with disabilities find and maintain employment. Strong collaborations, high organizational capacity, effective collaborations that met the needs of participants, the ability to quickly make implementation changes, clear and concise program goals, effective communication, and strategic coordination were all elements that increased the likelihood of programmatic success and positive outcomes.

Strong collaborations with clearly defined and delineated goals helped organizations recruit participants, find resources, and place participants in employment. Programs that were able to engage organizations, community groups, employers, and/or other groups had additional programmatic resources to rely on. Collaborations were crucial in situations where program staff had limited time or experience to innovate through challenges and were instrumental in helping staff overcome adversity. In fact, the type of organization leading the program mattered less in the case of the 21 programs than having and leveraging strong collaborations.

Organizational capacity mattered when analyzing elements of success among the 21 programs. Programs led by organizations with high capacity and resources, including staff time, salary dollars, staff with various types and high levels of expertise, and strong collaborations, were more likely to experience elements of success through implementation and outcomes. Organizations with fewer resources were more likely to struggle with various implementation elements such as, but not limited to, recruitment and placement of participants. Organizations with lower capacity were, however, able to overcome many of these issues by utilizing strategic, strong collaborations.

Collaborations helped meet the needs of participants across several programs. The needs of participants were not fully understood or anticipated by several organizations. While it is not always possible to anticipate the realm of barriers faced by individuals with disabilities, programs that were responsive to participant needs and leveraged multiple partners were often able to reduce participant barriers faster than those without help from partners. Programs that attempted to meet the needs of participants without additional help or resources were often mired in lengthy implementation periods.



Agile organizations were able to overcome challenges and innovate. Programs that were able to overcome challenges also responded quickly and pivoted direction as necessary. Analyses demonstrated there were a variety of ways that program staff changed programmatic elements in response to difficulties. These included adding or changing partners, forging new relationships, expanding recruitment, changing the program model, shifting goals, and refocusing efforts.

Clear and concise program goals helped organizations implement them in a timely manner. Program goals that were complex or overly ambitious were much more difficult to achieve. Programs that took on too many elements struggled to execute them during implementation. Some staff had to select elements of the program to execute, leaving some program goals unmet. Others were unable to fulfill their outcomes goals as implementation took longer than expected. Programs with a relatively narrow focus and those with clear and concise goals were more likely to achieve successful program elements or outcomes.

Effective communication among partners led to an increased likelihood of successful implementation. Staff across many programs stressed the importance of effective communication. When partners knew their role in the program and what was expected of them, they were more likely to be able to meet expectations in a timely manner. Multiple programs reported that miscues in communication led to longer implementation times and a decreased likelihood of program success.

Strategic coordination through planning and implementation increased the likelihood of program success. Organizations that worked with their partners to coordinate implementation efforts had more success. Along with effective communication and clear and concise program goals, strategic coordination created definitive roles, clear implementation efforts, and overlapping success goals.

These elements, in addition to innovation, are key to programmatic success as well as instrumental to increasing the likelihood of individuals with disabilities finding and retaining work. Programs that exhibited these traits were more likely to have elements of success and overcome challenges. Kessler Foundation continues to offer funding and support to innovative organizations and programs to further the goal of equity in employment for individuals with disabilities.

Appendix A: Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant Programs, Summary Details

Program	Start Date	Duration	Impacted by COVID-19 Pandemic	Subpopulation Served	Prior Pilot or Workforce Experience	Program Setting
"Bridging the Gap from College to Careers"	January 2016	3 years	No	College students with disabilities	Yes	Nonprofit and higher education collaboration
"Career Pathway Services"	January 2017	2 years	No	Individuals in Massachusetts with MRC 16 status ²¹	Yes	Governmental agency
"Career Success"	January 2017	2 years	No	Individuals with mental illness	Yes	Nonprofit
"Combat2Careers"	January 2019	3 years	Yes	Veterans with disabilities	Yes	Higher education institutions
"Easterseals Disability Staffing Network"	January 2018	2 years, 6 months	Yes	Individuals with disabilities	Yes	Nonprofit
"Financial Access Inclusion and Resources"	May 2019	2 years, 10 months	Yes	Formerly incarcerated individuals with disabilities	No	Nonprofit
"Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model"	January 2016	3 years	No	Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism	No	Hospitals
"Inclusive Pathways"	January 2018	2 years, 3 months	Yes	Individuals with disabilities	No	Nonprofit collaboration
"JusticeWorks"	January 2019	1 year, 7 months	Yes	Individuals with disabilities	Yes	Nonprofit
"Maryland Customized Employment Project"	January 2016	2 years	No	Individuals with developmental disabilities	No	Community organizations
"Meaningful Jobs"	March 2017	2 years, 4 months	No	Individuals with autism	No	Nonprofit

²¹ MRC 16 status refers to individuals with disabilities who are classified by the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission as most in need of restorative services.

Program	Start Date	Duration	Impacted by COVID-19 Pandemic	Subpopulation Served	Prior Pilot or Workforce Experience	Program Setting
"NYC: ATWORK"	March 2017	2 years, 9 months	No	Individuals with disabilities in New York City	Yes	Governmental agency
"Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth"	January 2016	2 years	No	Youth with disabilities	No	High schools
"Road to Employment"	January 2020	2 years, 6 months	Yes	Individuals with disabilities	Yes	Nonprofit
"21 and Able Employment/Career Transition"	January 2015	2 years	No	Youth with disabilities	Yes	Community organization
"Upbound at Work"	January 2018	2 years	No	Individuals with autism	Yes	Nonprofit
"Virtual Reality Job Interview Training"	May 2017	2 years, 7 months	No	Youth with disabilities	No	Higher education
"Virtual Work and Supports" ²²	January 2018	4 years, 6 months	Yes	Individuals with disabilities	Yes	Higher education collaboration
"Warrior Bridge"	January 2015	2 years, 6 months	No	Veterans with disabilities	Yes	Nonprofit
"Works Job Club"	January 2018	2 years, 11 months	Yes	Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing	Yes	Nonprofit
"WorkVT 2.0"	January 2020	3 years	Yes	Individuals with disabilities receiving Social Security Disability Insurance and/or Supplemental Security Income	Yes	Governmental agency

²² This program was originally known as *Just in Time Employment Supports* as awarded to the University of Iowa Midwest Disability Employment Consortium in January 2018. The grant was transferred to the University of Arizona under the name *Virtual Work and Supports*, which operated through June 2022.

Appendix B: Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grant Programs, Impacts and Goals

Organization	Program Name	Impact(s)	Type of Organization
Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago	"Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Successful in expanding awareness of current programs for students with disabilities on community college and four-year college campuses. ▶ Successful in encouraging independence by explaining and offering tools for the entire job search process. 	High schools
Anixter Center	"Inclusive Pathways"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Successful in its use of a disability inclusion coordinator to assist with job preparation and assistance. ▶ Successfully demonstrated the use of a full-time staff member solely committed to training and career development. 	Nonprofit collaboration
The Arc of the United States	"JusticeWorks"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Successful in expanding awareness about best practices for understanding and engaging with individuals with disabilities. ▶ The Growth Through Opportunity program was successful in assigning individual interns to specific agencies to encourage relationship building and greater understanding with supervisors. 	Nonprofit
Autism Alliance of Michigan	"Upbound at Work"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Demonstrated the importance of adopting a person-first approach using hired navigators and specialists who were committed to supporting program participants prior to and during their job experiences. 	Nonprofit
Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc.	"Works Job Club"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Maintained a program structure conducive to successful virtual programming but needed adequate funding for sustainability. 	Nonprofit
Disability Rights Louisiana	"Financial Access Inclusion and Resources"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Met program employment goals through a strong network of organizations and service providers. 	Nonprofit
Easterseals DC/MD/VA	"Easterseals Disability Staffing Network"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Involvement in the Ticket to Work program for employment and training support of people between the ages of 18 and 64 who rely on Social Security Disability Insurance proved successful for the program. 	Nonprofit

Organization	Program Name	Impact(s)	Type of Organization
HireAbility Vermont	"WorkVT 2.0"	▶ Successful due to its team-based and relationship-centered approach in serving participant needs.	Governmental agency
Jewish Employment and Vocational Services Human Services	"Road to Employment"	▶ Successfully overcame program delays and challenges by transitioning to a virtual design and offering technical support opportunities.	Nonprofit
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Coalition	"Career Pathway Services"	▶ Demonstrated the importance of a team-based approach in addressing hard-to-reach groups.	Governmental agency
May Institute and Work Inc.	"Meaningful Jobs"	▶ Parents, participants, and employers involved in the program felt confident and adequately prepared for supporting, joining, and serving the workforce.	Nonprofit
Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas	"Career Success"	▶ Successfully implemented a holistic individualized approach for identifying and addressing barriers of participants with serious mental illnesses.	Nonprofit
Mercy Healthcare Foundation	"Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model"	▶ Encouraged system-wide change throughout the Mercy Health system. ▶ Mercy Health hospitals became more diverse and inclusive due to program training and development.	Hospitals
New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities	"NYC: ATWORK"	▶ Participants felt more confident about finding and maintaining stable employment.	Governmental agency
Seeking Employment, Equality, and Community for People with Developmental Disabilities	"Maryland Customized Employment Project"	▶ Successful in training staff members in customized employment, or the importance of personalized relationships between employers and workers. ▶ Participating agencies incorporated customized employment into their regular practices.	Community organization
ServiceSource	"Warrior Bridge"	▶ Successful in promoting a sense of community and professional skill-building among veterans with disabilities.	Nonprofit

Organization	Program Name	Impact(s)	Type of Organization
Stand Among Friends and Policyworks, Inc.	“Bridging the Gap from College to Careers”	▶ Program components are being used in the design of similar programs, including the use of program curricula for state credits at higher education institutions and the development of virtual programming.	Nonprofit and higher education collaboration
United Way of Allegheny County	“21 and Able Employment/ Career Transition”	▶ Successful in identifying and addressing barriers among youth with disabilities through the use of embedded employment professionals or career transition professionals.	Community organization
University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities	“Virtual Work and Supports”	▶ Successful in adapting to the increasing need for virtual career readiness programming following the pandemic.	Higher education collaboration
University of Michigan	“Virtual Reality Job Interview Training”	▶ Successful in increasing student employment outcomes due to the collaborative team-based environment among program staff and teachers.	Higher education
Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University	“Combat2Careers”	▶ Proved to be sustainable due to the use of dedicated veteran project coordinators for employment support of veteran program participants.	Higher education

Appendix C: Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grants

Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago (Chicago, IL) - *Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth* aimed to help youth with disabilities transition to either college or a career following high school. Students involved in the program received access to job training resources, individualized career planning, and regular coaching to ensure a successful transition.

Anixter Center (Chicago, IL) - *Inclusive Pathways* aimed to expand representation of employees with disabilities in the healthcare field. In addition to offering training for hospital staff and leaders on best practices for serving workers with disabilities, the program offered training and development opportunities for job seekers with disabilities.

The Arc of the United States (Washington, DC) - *JusticeWorks* trained first responders and criminal justice professionals on best practices for interacting with individuals with disabilities in a sensitive and competent manner to reduce unnecessary arrests. It also offered career preparation and internship opportunities for people with disabilities.

Autism Alliance of Michigan (Southfield, MI) - *Upbound at Work* aimed to train and prepare individuals with autism for positions at automotive companies. The program offered ongoing assistance services to ensure successful transition and retention.

Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc. (Austin, TX) - *Works Job Club* served members of the deaf and hard-of-hearing population. With virtual programming that incorporated American Sign Language, the program offered interview practice, résumé assistance, self-advocacy strategies, and other employment support services.

Disability Rights Louisiana (New Orleans, LA) - *Financial Access Inclusion and Resources* served formerly incarcerated individuals with disabilities. The program offered employment search and support services, as well as financial coaching.

Easterseals DC/MD/VA (Silver Spring, MD) - *Easterseals Disability Staffing Network* helped people with disabilities find job opportunities in the private sector. The program served disabled job seekers with career readiness tools and strategies, as well as assistance with wraparound services, including transportation and professional clothing.

HireAbility Vermont (Williston, VT) - *WorkVT 2.0* aimed to reduce public benefit use among individuals with disabilities who received Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income. The aim of the program was to assist individuals with disabilities with transitioning off public benefits and into full-time employment.

Jewish Employment and Vocational Services, Human Services (Philadelphia, PA) - *Road to Employment* aimed to help individuals with disabilities rely less on public benefits by offering career navigators to assist with employment. The program offered competency training for program staff to successfully identify and address the needs of job seekers with disabilities.

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Coalition (Boston, MA) - *Career Pathway Services* aimed to reduce public benefit use among individuals with disabilities. The program offered peer support services, benefits planning, and employment matching for those in need.

May Institute and Work Inc. (Randolph, MA) - *Meaningful Jobs* served individuals with autism spectrum disorder. It prepared program participants for opportunities at the Transportation Security Administration by offering preparation and support services.

Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas (Wichita, KS) - *Career Success* aimed to serve individuals with serious mental illnesses. The program used a holistic approach to offer cognitive remediation, compensatory skills training, and mental and physical health skills for the purpose of helping participants secure employment.

Mercy Healthcare Foundation (St. Louis, MO) - *Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model* aimed to increase representation of employees with disabilities in Mercy Health hospitals. The program also aimed to implement strategies for system-wide change in diversity, equity, and inclusion outcomes.

New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (New York, NY) - *NYC: ATWORK* aimed to help people with disabilities in New York City transition into employment. The program connected individuals with disabilities with businesses in need of their unique skills and abilities.

Seeking Employment, Equality, and Community for People with Developmental Disabilities (Silver Spring, MD) - The *Maryland Customized Employment Project* aimed to increase rates of employment among individuals in Maryland with developmental disabilities. The program also aimed to identify and address current employment barriers for this group to empower and expand the Maryland workforce.

ServiceSource (Clearwater, FL) - *Warrior Bridge* helped veterans with traumatic brain injuries find and navigate work opportunities. Participants in the program gained job skills, access to job matching, and a sense of community with other veterans.

Stand Among Friends and Policyworks, Inc. (Boca Raton, FL) - *Bridging the Gap from College to Careers* offered career readiness resources for college students with disabilities. Program participants received college credit to learn career skills and gain access to internships, mentorships, and job matching.

United Way of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh, PA) - *21 and Able Employment/Career Transition* assisted youth with disabilities with finding and retaining employment. The program used career transition professionals who guided and advocated for youth during their transition to a career.

University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities (Tucson, AZ) - *Virtual Work and Supports* used technology to provide employment support services to people with disabilities. The program aimed to promote a sense of independence by showing participants how to successfully navigate virtual work opportunities. The program was originally known as *Just in Time Employment Supports*, which was then led by the University of Iowa Midwest Disability Employment Consortium.

University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI) - *Virtual Reality Job Interview Training* offered virtual interview training and skill development for in-transition youth and high school students with disabilities. The program addressed and reduced barriers to employment and retention.

Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY) - *Combat2Careers* assisted military veterans with adjusting to life as civilians. Through the work of veteran project coordinators assigned to specific college campuses, the program reached veterans to identify their challenges/barriers and assist with transition into employment.

Appendix D: Heldrich Center Evaluation Reports of Kessler Foundation Signature Employment Grants

Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago

Year 2 Evaluation of the Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth Program

Laurie M. Harrington, July 2018

Year 1 Evaluation of the Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth Program

Laurie M. Harrington, June 2017

Anixter Center

Final Evaluation of the Anixter Center's Inclusive Pathways Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, June 2022

Interim Evaluation of the Anixter Center's Inclusive Pathways Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, July 2021

The Arc of the United States

Final Report for the Evaluation of The Arc's JusticeWorks Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, September 2020

Autism Alliance of Michigan

Final Report of the Evaluation of Autism Alliance of Michigan's Automotive Employment Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, May 2020

Interim Evaluation of Autism Alliance of Michigan's Automotive Employment Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, June 2019

Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc.

Final Evaluation of CSD Works Job Club

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, March 2021

Interim Evaluation of CSD Works Job Club

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, September 2019

Disability Rights Louisiana

Evaluation of the Financial Access Inclusion and Resources Program: Final Report

Kristine Joy Bacani, March 2022

Interim Evaluation of the Financial Access Inclusion and Resources Program

Kristine Joy Bacani, August 2020

Easterseals DC/MD/VA

Final Evaluation of Easterseals DC/MD/VA's Easterseals Disability Network

Brittney Donovan, July 2021

Interim Evaluation of Easterseals DC/MD/VA's Easterseals Disability Network

Laurie M. Harrington, December 2020

HireAbility Vermont

Final Evaluation of WorkVT2.0

Kristine Joy Bacani, June 2024

Interim Evaluation of the WorkVT2.0 Program

Kristine Joy Bacani, August 2022

Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) Human Services

Final Evaluation of JEVS Human Services' Road to Employment Program

Brittney Donovan, September 2023

Interim Evaluation of JEVS Human Services' Road to Employment Program

Brittney Donovan, July 2021

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

Final Evaluation of the Career Pathway Services Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, May 2019

Year 1 Evaluation of the Career Pathway Services Program

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, May 2018

May Institute and Work, Inc.

Final Evaluation of the Meaningful Jobs Program

Laurie M. Harrington, December 2019

Year 1 Evaluation of the Meaningful Jobs Program

Laurie M. Harrington, July 2018

Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas

Final Report of the Evaluation of the Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas' Career Success Program

Marjory F. Palius, October 2020

Evaluation of the Career Success Program: Year 1

Laurie M. Harrington, January 2019

Mercy Healthcare Foundation

Evaluation of the Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model: Final Report

Laurie M. Harrington, February 2019

Evaluation of the Healthcare Workforce Inclusion Model: Interim Report

Laurie M. Harrington, March 2018

New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

Final Evaluation of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities' NYC: ATWORK Program

Laurie M. Harrington, April 2021

Evaluation of Year 1 of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities' NYC: ATWORK Initiative

Amy Dunford, August 2019

Seeking Employment, Equality, and Community for People with Developmental Disabilities

Final Evaluation of the Maryland Customized Employment Project

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, March 2018

Maryland Customized Employment Project: Interim Evaluation

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, April 2017

ServiceSource

Warrior Bridge Brain Injury Demonstration Project: Final Evaluation

Laurie M. Harrington, October 2017

Warrior Bridge Brain Injury Demonstration Project: Interim Evaluation

Laurie M. Harrington, December 2016

Stand Among Friends and PolicyWorks, Inc.

Final Evaluation of the Bridging the Gap from College to Careers Program in Florida

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, April 2019

Florida Bridging the Gap from College to Careers: Interim Report

Stephanie (Holcomb) Walsh, May 2017

United Way of Allegheny County

Year Two Evaluation of the 21 and Able Employment/Career Transition Program

Tony Giordano, March 2017

Year One Evaluation of the 21 and Able Employment/Career Transition Program

Tony Giordano, December 2016

**University of Arizona Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities/
State University of Iowa, Center for Disabilities and Development**

Final Evaluation of the Virtual Work and Supports Program

Brittney Donovan, January 2023

Interim Evaluation of Midwest Disability Employment Consortium: Just in Time Employment Supports

Amy Dunford, February 2020

University of Michigan

Final Evaluation of the Virtual Reality Job Interview Training Program

Amy Dunford, April 2020

Evaluation of Year 1 of the University of Michigan's Virtual Reality Job Interview Program

Amy Dunford, August 2018

Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University

Final Evaluation of the Combat2Careers Program

Marjory F. Palius, July 2022

Interim Evaluation of the Combat2Careers Program

Marjory F. Palius, December 2020

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About Kessler Foundation

Kessler Foundation, a major nonprofit organization in the field of disability, is a global leader in rehabilitation research that seeks to improve cognition, mobility, and long-term outcomes, including employment, for people with neurological disabilities caused by diseases and injuries of the brain and spinal cord. Kessler Foundation leads the nation in funding innovative programs that expand opportunities for employment for people with disabilities.

About the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

The **Heldrich Center for Workforce Development** at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.