

The Arc of New Jersey – Project HIRE Fiscal Year 2020 Summary

Project HIRE has been assisting individuals who live with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive, integrated employment in the community for more than 35 years. Each year, we like to highlight some of Project HIRE's achievements and look ahead to ways we can improve services in the coming year.

Fiscal Year 2020 – The Stats

21 field staff members

6.8 average years working for Project HIRE

14 New Jersey counties served

23,100 service hours logged

530 individuals served monthly

150 individuals placed in competitive employment

Staffing

Agencies employing direct support professionals (DSPs) are experiencing extreme turnover. The national industry average calculates the rate to be 45%. Project HIRE's turnover rate for FY 2019 reached 47%. After this troubling number, the program director developed a new onboarding training program aimed at improving retention of new employees, the most affected area. By assembling a small group made from multiple levels of the agency, a complete overhaul of onboarding was executed and implemented. This initiative was successful in lowering this number, even in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For FY 20, Project HIRE's retention rate is now 37% which is slightly above the industry average.

A combination of low reimbursement rates and increased regulations on services provided still results in continued low DSP wages. Essentially entry level wages have led to the hire of DSPs with little prior experience in the field, which increases training costs. For these reasons, employers of DSPs, such as Project HIRE are struggling to keep new hires and meet financial incentives. When adjusted for outliers, the average years spent with Project HIRE for those who left the agency during FY 20 are approximately 1 year. On the other hand, staff members who are still with Project HIRE have an average more than 7 years with the agency, far above the industry average. With New Jersey moving towards a \$15 minimum wage, many DSPs are finding higher wages in jobs with less responsibility such as retail and food service. Far too often, newly trained staff leave the industry for more lucrative positions with retailers and food services. Providers who employ DSPs rely on predetermined rates for services paid for by the State and Medicaid so little adjustment can be made to wages without a substantial increase in these predetermined rates.

Growth in Services Provided

As noted in the FY 2019 report, the Division of Developmental Disabilities expanded the supported employment service options for individuals qualified for the program. This has led to an expansion for Project HIRE in participants served in the DDD system. The two primary funders of Project HIRE services are the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Division of Developmental disabilities. At the beginning of FY19, 20% of services were provided through the DDD system, with the remainder from DVRS. By the end of FY20, this ratio has transitioned to 40% of services provided coming from the DDD system. The need for supported employment is more substantial than ever and Project HIRE continues to expand and design more robust supported employment services to be provided to DDD participants including job sampling, prevocational services, career planning and exploration. By serving more individuals in this capacity the program should increase its DDD footprint in New Jersey.

Plans for the Next Fiscal Year

A major goal for FY 2020 was an expansion of Transition Services. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the program was poised to grow and had several districts approved for 100s of hours of services. In March of 2020, all schools shut down thereby immediately halting all community services approved. Traditionally, March-May is the period of the year in which the majority

of Transition Services are provided so the pandemic could not have hit at a worse time for Project HIRE. However, Project HIRE immediately began development of virtual and online alternatives that could be vended safely and according to COVID-19 guidelines. While not as robust as hoped, it is projected that Project HIRE will be able to provide virtual services in the fall to most of the school districts that were forced to cancel agreements in the spring. Project HIRE will find safe, creative and effective ways to provide services according to COVID-19 guidelines while preparing for the eventual return to “normal” in which the need for community based vocational services will be great.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services has also continued to refer individuals to participate in Trial Work Experience. This experience helps DVRS determine appropriateness for programs at the local offices. High turnover has made expansion of this service difficult since a certain level of experience is required in order to bill for TWE. Pre-Employment Transition Services were another area in which the Program Director aimed to grow during FY 2020. The referrals for specialized services like Pre-ETS and TWE, unfortunately, came in irregular numbers, making it difficult to provide consistently even before the pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was especially devastating to the push for a stronger TWE and Pre-ETS program. Without the ability for individuals to go into the community or work closely with others, the opportunities and sites became few and far between. Based on these factors, TWE and Pre-ETS will not be a major focus of Project HIRE for FY 2021.

During fiscal year 2020, Project HIRE provided services to the third Project SEARCH graduating cohort in Union County. Project SEARCH provides a select group of students with the opportunity to participate in a comprehensive internship and training program at the Overlook Medical Center in Summit, New Jersey in place of his or her last year in high school. The 2019/2020 Project SEARCH cohort was a success and the program met all required benchmarks. 3 students from the graduating class are now gainfully employed with the Overlook Medical Center in career areas such as hospitality and patient transport. Project HIRE was again chosen as the provider for the 2020/2021 cohort and is excited to pursue continued positive outcomes for the next graduating class.

The program director continues to promote technology as a means to achieve better outcomes, work more efficiently and help staff operate more simply. During FY 19, a new electronic monitoring system was selected, designed and successfully implemented at Project HIRE. Increased efficiency and reductions in administrative costs help the program work toward providing more competitive wages for DSPs. In FY 2020, Project HIRE took full advantage of the program. Templates were created that guide staff on documentation requirements, agency forms were digitized and now allow for electronic signatures from both staff and participants, digital tools were developed to improve services offered and caseload tracking tools were tweaked to make monitoring of the program easier and more efficient than ever. In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, these digital tools proved to be invaluable as many services have migrated to a virtual format and Project HIRE is well prepared. The program experienced only minimal logistical and processing issues since most administrative functions were completely digital before the outset of the pandemic.

In these ways Project HIRE will continue its success, grow in influence and maintain its positive reputation in the Supported Employment sphere.