Community Conversations to Increase Employment Opportunities for Young Adults With Developmental Disabilities in California

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Abstract

In 2013, California enacted an Employment First policy that prioritized competitive integrated employment as the first option and preferred outcome for adults with developmental disabilities. State agencies are working toward anchoring their policies and practices for successful local implementation of the Employment First policy. This study conducted community conversations to generate recommended strategies by local communities to increase the employment of people with disabilities. Drawing upon the World Café process, an assets-based approach, we engaged 431 employers, educators, disability agency staff, local and state government officials, individuals with disabilities, and other community members in seven geographically diverse areas across California to answer the question "What can we do to increase the number of people with disabilities working in our community?" In addition, responses to participant feedback and follow-up surveys offered additional insight into the perceived ability and readiness of communities to take action toward this goal. Analysis of the conversation notes and responses to the surveys underscored the importance of building partnerships with employers. This study highlights a useful approach for mobilizing communities' local assets, resources, and ideas that can be used to advance state policy for employment.

Keywords

employment, developmental disabilities, system(s) change, community conversations

Despite growing national attention to the employment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), employment rates have remained persistently low. Moreover, significant disparities in the employment rate for working-age people without disabilities (77.6%) versus people with any disability (34.6%) are even more pronounced for those with IDD (24.2%; Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2016). California's employment rate for people with IDD who were supported by the state's Developmental Disabilities agencies was lower than national figures, with just 12.1% receiving integrated employment services. The majority (76%) attended facility-based, nonwork programs (day or look-alike programs) rather than employment services (Department of Developmental Services, 2013–2014). Those who are working are typically underemployed and have limited hours at low wages (Boeltzig, Timmons, & Butterworth, 2008; Butterworth et al., 2016). Research has identified a host of reasons for the intractable low rates of employment of people with disabilities including negative attitudes (Burge, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Lysaght, 2007; Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006), low

expectations (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Shogren & Plotner, 2012), and disparate service systems (Federal Partners in Transition Workgroup, 2015).

In 2012, California was one of seven states selected for a Partnerships in Employment systems change project under the Administrations on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities' Projects of National Significance Program. Under this initiative, we established the California Employment Consortium for Youth and Young Adults with IDD (CECY), a collaboration of 45 representatives from 25 local and state agencies, associations, organizations, families, and self-advocates with responsibilities for the education, preparation, support,

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and employment of youth and young adults with IDD. The organizations and agencies represented included the State Departments of Education, Rehabilitation, Developmental Disabilities, and Employment Development, as well as families and youth self-advocates. The mission of the CECY was to stimulate policy change and build capacity in California state systems and local communities to support meaningful employment opportunities and increase the number of individuals with IDD in competitive integrated employment (CIE; Raynor, Hayward, & Rice, in press). For years, California had been working to develop an Employment First (EF) policy. Through cross-agency support from CECY and perseverance, California became 1 of 17 states with EF legislation after several attempts. This legislation affirms employment in integrated settings at or above minimum wage with commensurate benefits is a priority and preferred outcome for publicly funded services for individuals with IDD (Developmental Services: Employment First Policy, 2013; Hoff, 2016). California's EF policy states that "opportunities for integrated competitive employment will be given the highest priority for working age individuals with developmental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities" (Section 4869(a) (1)). The next steps were to develop concrete steps that could help the state and local communities begin the process of implementing policy into practice.

Shortly following the state's adoption of an EF policy, new developments in federal-level policy bolstered systems change efforts by raising expectations that all people with IDD can and should work in integrated settings when provided with the necessary transition, job preparation, and job supports. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid's new requirements for the funding of Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS; Advocacy Coalition, 2015) added protections to ensure that individuals receiving services will have full access to the community, including individual integrated employment. The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) required increased coordination between education, labor, and rehabilitation agencies to strengthen transition and preemployment transition services such as job exploration, work-based learning, and self-advocacy to improve transition of youth from school to postsecondary education or an employment outcome (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Collectively, these policies encourage the development of collaborative cross-system reform, coordination, and collaboration among the Departments of Developmental Services, Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, and other community partners.

California's EF legislation did not include any modifications to funding, changes to the service delivery system, training, or technical assistance to advance policy into practice. So how can communities move forward and start to implement the EF policy and related federal policies when there is little guidance on what it takes for this paradigm shift to be enacted? As Carter and Bumble (2018) state, "between individuals and systems lies the community." It is through local communities that real change in an individual's status can be observed. A fellow grantee, the TennesseeWorks Partnership, implemented "community conversations" to generate ideas and solutions to employment within local communities in their state as a way to tap into the assets and resources of local communities rather than solely relying on formal systems of services and supports (Carter et al., 2016; Carter, Blustein, Rowan, & Harvey, 2014). Previous studies have applied this approach to uncovering community solutions to the employment of adolescents with disabilities (Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2012), increasing summer employment opportunities for transition-age youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Dutta et al., 2016), engaging parent leaders in community change efforts (Carter, Swedeen, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, 2012), and generating ideas for the employment of youth with IDD (Carter et al., 2016). Based on the success of Tennessee's community conversations, we chose to adapt this approach to gain a better understanding of local resources and effective practices in California communities to expand integrated employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and to inform policy changes at the state level.

Community conversations offer a promising way to bring together various members of a community to brainstorm strategies and identify resources that can be used to increase the employment of people with disabilities. These conversations are predicated on the belief that each community member has expertise, the communities themselves have untapped resources and relationships, and lasting change comes from the commitment of its members (Swedeen, Cooney, Moss, & Carter, 2011). Community conversations draw upon the World Café model where community members come together for facilitated small- and large-group discussions centered around specific questions to generate solutions (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Community conversations can also be useful for community organizing and may be used as a strategy for systems change efforts (Carter et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore local resources and ideas for increasing employment opportunities for young adults with IDD. Seven community conversations were held to address our research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the local solutions and promising ideas generated through seven community conversations to increase employment of people with disabilities?
Research Question 2: What are participants' beliefs about their communities' readiness to take steps to employ more people with disabilities?

Method

Community Conversations

Selection of the communities. The community conversations were held in seven communities in Northern and Southern California, referred to as Communities A through G. All events took place in the second year of our 5-year statewide systems change grant that led to the formation of the CECY with IDD. The meetings were held in communities where CECY had recognized and awarded a small grant to document and expand promising practices for transitioning youth and young adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities into employment. Four of the programs were situated within secondary education and one within postsecondary education. The two remaining programs were employment service providers. Each of the programs achieved higher employment rates for young adults than what was being achieved at the state or national level for individuals with IDD. These programs served as our first point of contact and the organizer for their local community event. Although events drew from the surrounding areas, community conversations themselves were held in two rural areas (A and C), four large cities (B, D, E, G), and one small city (F), with populations ranged from 7,291 to 1.3 million (National Center on Education Statistics, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Local planning teams (LPTs). Representatives from the local community, building from the identified programs described above, along with a CECY staff member, served on LPTs. The LPTs varied in size from 8 to 11 people, with two members serving as the primary leaders. The LPTs had representation from a cross section of community members including representation from schools, disability organizations, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, employers, and government staff. The role of the LPTs was to provide local perspectives on the community conversation, coordinate event logistics and registration, encourage attendance through personal and professional connections, and participate as a table host during the conversation. The LPTs were also responsible for selecting a title for the event, crafting the invitation, and selecting the opening speakers. The minimum commitment of the LPT members was to participate on two webinar teleconference trainings and one postconversation debrief teleconference.

CECY staff provided training and guidance to support all pre-event planning and logistics. The planning process started 5 to 7 months prior to each conversation. Three initial calls with the LPT leads were held to plan for the conversations. Each organization invited members from its community to participate on its LPT. The trainings consisted of background information on the significance of the issue of disability and employment, the process for hosting a community conversation, and a detailed review of the conversation materials and table host responsibilities. In addition, the CECY staff member held monthly check-in calls with each LPT until the month before the community conversation, and then weekly calls and emails with the two primary leaders until the day of the event.

Participant recruitment. Publicity and outreach for the event began 6 weeks before each community conversation. The intent was to invite a broad cross section of community members to attend the event. A CECY staff member provided guidance to the LPTs regarding potential categories of participants as well as the specific suggestion to outreach to employers and young adults with disabilities. The LPTs were encouraged to outreach throughout their counties to community members within and outside the disability community such as the Chamber of Commerce, independent living centers, faith-based organizations, rotary clubs, youth organizations, employers, educators, arts organizations, nonprofits, parents, service providers, and other nonprofit organizations. All seven LPTs created a "Save the Date" flyer, made personal phone calls, and sent emails to ensure invitees would attend. Four of the communities created a press release that they distributed to their local newspapers and newsletters. One community created a public service announcement and distributed flyers at a local popular diner. Six of the communities utilized an online event-planning site (i.e., SplashThat) for registrants to RSVP, as well as telephone and email.

Six of the seven community conversations had almost all of their participants register prior to the event. In one community (A), there was only one registrant prior to the event. The LPT for that community insisted that "people in their community do not RSVP" and indeed there were 51 in attendance. At the other six events, five to 10 people registered on-site the day of the conversation. An invitation to each of the seven community conversations was also announced in the weekly CECY online newsletter. In addition, a community conversation page was created on the CECY website that listed all of the events with a link to the online registration.

Participants

A total of 431 community members attended one of the seven events ($M = 62$; range = 41–85 per conversation). Participants identified themselves as representing employers ($n = 83$, 19.3%), school or education ($n = 80$, 18.6%), disability service providers ($n = 76$, 17.6%), individuals with disabilities ($n = 64$, 14.8%), community nonprofit representatives ($n = 54$, 12.5%), government representatives ($n = 39$, 9.0%), family members of someone with a disability ($n = 38$, 8.8%), faith-based community representatives ($n = 13$, 3.0%), or others ($n = 10$, 2.3%, for example, consultant, advocate). Participants were asked to identify "all roles" that best described them; therefore, totals may exceed total number of participants per site.

Table 1. Percentage of Participant Roles Represented by Community Conversation.

Participant role	Community conversation site							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Total
Employer/business leader	28.6	12.8	40.0	12.7	12.4	17.0	6.4	83
Faith community member	4.4	—	4.0	5.5	1.1	2.1	2.6	13
Educator	7.7	17.0	22.0	29.1	6.7	34.0	20.5	80
Government official or staff	13.2	8.5	6.0	11.0	11.2	2.1	3.8	39
Community/nonprofit leader or staff	11.0	12.8	6.0	11.0	21.3	8.5	7.7	54
Disability agency/provider	16.5	14.9	4.0	9.1	29.2	4.3	24.4	76
Person with a disability	11.0	25.5	10.0	9.1	10.1	12.8	21.8	64
Family member of individual with disability	6.6	6.4	8.0	12.7	5.6	6.4	12.8	38
Other	1.1	2.1	—	—	2.2	12.8	—	10
Total roles represented	91	47	50	55	89	47	78	457

Note. Participants could identify more than one role so totals may exceed total number of participants.

Representation of these roles varied by site. Table 1 displays participant role by community conversation site. Two sites had a large employer turn out (Community A = 26, Community C = 20). Other sites had a high attendance of representatives from school and education. For example, attendees in communities D, F, and G predominantly identified themselves as affiliated with the school/education field (16 at each site). Representation from disability agencies most frequently occurred at conversations in communities A (15), E (26), and G (19). In general, there were few family members of someone with a disability in attendance (range = 3–7). However, there was strong representation of individuals with disabilities, particularly in communities B (12) and G (17). Two sites also had notable representation from government officials in attendance (Community A = 12, Community E = 10).

Community conversation procedures. Participants were instructed to sit at a table with people they did not know, generally 5 to 10 people at each table. Ten individuals were assigned to be table hosts with two backup hosts for each conversation. Identified table hosts met 1.5 hr prior to the conversation start time to be briefed on their responsibilities and tips for facilitating the discussion. Table hosts were responsible for encouraging participation from everyone, keeping participants focused on brainstorming solutions rather than becoming stuck on what is not working, assisting participants to quickly move to another table at the end of each round, handing out the participant feedback survey and follow-up cards, and documenting the top three ideas from their table for each round. A staff timekeeper monitored the time to keep to the schedule.

Each community conversation began with a welcome from invited speakers from the community. The speakers set the tone for the conversations that followed. There were two to four speakers per event: three events with employers, four with government officials (i.e., mayor, state assembly, state senate, and local official), two with students with disabilities, two with college administrators, and one with a community advocate. The content of their remarks varied; youth spoke about how much they valued their work, an employer described her success finding the "right person for the right job," and a government official talked about existing local employment regulations that assist people with disabilities access public sector jobs. Six of the seven communities showed a short film featuring youth and young adults with IDD successfully working in the community and attesting to their value as an employee. Following introductory remarks, a CECY staff member explained the purpose of the conversation, described how it works, and posed the two questions participants would discuss during the three rounds:

1. In [name of community], what can we do to increase the number of people with disabilities working in our community? (Rounds 1 and 2).
2. How might we work more effectively together to make a real difference in employing people with disabilities in [name of community]? (Round 3).

Each round consisted of a small-group discussion with those around the table and lasted 15 min. The tables were covered with butcher-block paper and participants were encouraged to write down their ideas as a visual aid to remember their recommendations. At the end of each round, all participants were asked to move to another table and sit down next to people who they did not know. After the third round, the large-group discussion or "harvest" occurred for 25 min. During the large-group harvest, participants were

invited to share the most promising ideas they heard at their tables about what they could do to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities in their community. Through the harvest, participants could see for themselves the emerging patterns and similarities across the table discussions. A notetaker and two scribes documented the ideas shared during the harvest on large poster sheets in front of the room. The event ended with concluding remarks and distribution of a participant feedback survey and follow-up cards. Attendees who returned their participant feedback survey were eligible to enter a raffle for a US$25 gift card awarded before the event concluded.

Data Sources

Several data sources were collected during and post the community conversations. For purposes of this article, we analyzed the notes from the community conversations and responses from the two surveys (i.e., the participant feedback survey, follow-up survey).

Harvest notes. A staff member wrote down each of the recommendations made during the large-group discussion, when participants identified the top ideas they had heard at the different tables. The harvest yielded a total of 211 individual ideas (21–44 per event, $M = 30.1$).

Participant feedback survey. Participants were asked to complete a survey about their experience attending the community conversation at the end of the event. Seven items from the participant feedback survey were adapted from Carter et al. (2016). Participants were asked their level of agreement with eight statements using a 4-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). An option to mark "I don't know" was included. Four of the statements were related to the community conversation experience and four statements pertained to the perceived readiness of their community to employ people with disabilities (see Table 4 for items). In addition, participants were asked to complete the following statements: "I came to the community conversation because . . ." and "The idea I am most excited about is: _____." Furthermore, participants were asked what would have made the event better. We received completed surveys from 308 of the 431 attendees (71.5%).

Follow-up survey. Approximately 6 weeks after each event, we contacted attendees for whom we had contact information and invited them to complete an online survey addressing the continued barriers and action steps. The follow-up survey contained both items modified from Carter et al. (2016) as well as newly created items. Using the same 4-point scale described previously, we asked attendees the extent to which they agreed with two statements: "Attending this event was a good investment of my time" and "My community will take action to employ more people with disabilities." Furthermore, we added a yes/no question asking if they had told anyone about their community conversation experience. If they said yes, they were asked to indicate who that person was (i.e., employer, coworker/colleague, friend, family, neighbor, service organization member, elected official, and/or other). We also asked whether they had since taken any action or advocated for employing people with disabilities (i.e., yes, no, I don't know). When the answer was yes, we asked for a brief explanation of what they had done. Finally, we included two open-ended statements: "In [community name], the two biggest barriers to the people with disabilities getting jobs are: ___" and "In the next six months, the 2 to 3 most important things our community can do to increase the employment of people with disabilities are: _____". These surveys were completed by 158 (39.3%) attendees.

Data Analysis

This study used a mixed-methods approach to addressing our research questions, using both qualitative data from the harvest notes and open–ended questions as well as quantitative data from the surveys. In this way, we were able to capture diverse information related to the implementation of the community conversations and grounded in the communities' point of view about employment. We utilized the constant comparative method to analyze the ideas and solutions generated at each of the community conversations and open-ended questions on the surveys (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We utilized surveys to measure the value of the experience to the participants and their assessment of community readiness to act on the recommendations made.

Coding. To address the research questions, we created a codebook from a comprehensive list of the words and phrases documented within and across the community conversations that represented the ideas or solutions recommended to increase employment for people with disabilities. We utilized a grounded approach to the coding process, with codes emerging from an initial review of the harvest notes and responses about ideas most excited. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Each idea or recommendation was entered into a spreadsheet and considered a unit of text for coding and the analyses. If the unit of text represented multiple recommendations, it was separated into distinct entries. We had a total of 483 units of text available, grouped by community conversation. Ultimately, we were able to code 400 units of text; the remaining 83 units of text were either a one-word response, lacked a verb, or an uninterpretable action.

Themes were systematically revised throughout the coding process (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The first author developed an initial list of codes that were used for

each line of words and phrases (units of text) from one of the community conversations. All authors met to discuss each line of coding, review any discrepancies, and reach a consensus when differences were found. This was followed by a second round of coding of a portion of each of the six other community conversations and again doing a line-by-line review that led to additional revisions to the codebook. We refined our coding scheme based on our discussions of the data and provided additional details or intent. Some of the codes delineated specific stakeholder responsibility, such as employers: *strengthen provider and employer referral relationship*, or parents: *involve parents in transition to work*, while other codes were not specified and could be carried out by one or more community members such as *educate and inform the community*.

All of the conversations were coded in their entirety a second time. We completed coding in pairs, with each member of the pair independently identifying a theme from the community conversation and then meeting to review and reach agreement on any of the items coded differently. Each pair had one member who had attended the community conversation who could provide important insights and context for the interpretation, thus allowing previously uninterpretable text to be coded. The development of themes evolved as the research team discussed the codes and their meaning, what the codes exemplified, the ways they related to one another, and their goal. These discussions formed the initial basis for the construction of the themes. Using the recommended techniques described by Guest et al. (2012), we specifically looked for patterns and commonalities by making constant comparisons of similarities and differences between the codes within and across the community conversations, as well as the absence or frequency of recommended actions. For example, *provide career preparation experience, start transition from school to work early, involve parents in identifying community resources and employers, develop self-determination skills*, and *prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology*, were clustered together under the theme, *Prepare Youth and Adults with Disabilities for Work*. The final codebook contained 20 distinct codes for the recommended actions and solutions to increase the employment of people with disabilities that fell within five broad themes. Table 2 presents a description of all codes and themes. We transformed our final codes and themes into descriptive statistics for comparison within and across communities.

We used descriptive statistics (percentages and mean ratings) to summarize responses to the participant feedback survey and follow-up survey. The three open-ended questions on the follow-up survey were categorized and used to supplement other information pertaining to the perceived capacity of their community and their own actions taken since the conversation. As previously described, one item from the participant feedback survey was coded through the

constant comparative method to further inform ideas to increase employment of individuals with disabilities.

Results

The purpose of the seven community conversations was to engage representatives from diverse sectors of the community to identify existing resources and strategies to improve the employment opportunities and outcomes for people with disabilities. A total of 400 strategies were organized into 20 categories (groupings of strategies with similar ideas, practices, or recommendations) and five themes (groupings of categories that reflected a similar goal). See Table 2. Although the five themes were common to all seven communities, two themes encompassed 60.3% of all strategies: "Building Partnerships with Employers" and "Building Awareness and Share Resources." Table 3 displays the frequency of each theme and category mentioned across the community conversations.

Theme 1: Building Partnerships With Employers

Across all the community conversations, the most prominent theme addressed strategies to support employer-driven efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities (frequency or number of times the strategy was recommended $n = 134$, 33.5% of all categories of strategies). The most frequently recommended strategies were *creating or joining coalitions, associations, and networks* that would bring together a cross section of civic, business, and disability leaders to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Participants proposed the *creation of a local government liaison* who would serve as a conduit to community employers and develop employment opportunities in the public sector. Another recommended strategy was to foster *employer to employer outreach* where model employers would reach out to others and in doing so share their positive hiring and business practices for employing people with disabilities. For example, they could host business-to-business discussions about mentorships or internships, exchange stories of how they work with employees with disabilities, and discuss the benefits of hiring to their business. Another recommendation was to *strengthen the referral relationship between employers and providers* that would lead to successful job matches and placements.

Theme 2: Build Awareness and Share Resources

The second most discussed theme was to *build awareness and share resources* for education and training, resources, and information to people with disabilities, families, current and prospective employers and community members ($n = 107$, 27% of all strategies). These strategies focused on communicating and sharing successful employer-driven

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Categories With Definitions.

Theme/category	Description
Build partnerships with and among employers	Strategies to support employer-driven efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities
Increase employer to employer outreach	Develop opportunities for employers to share the benefits of their business and their successful employment practices
Strengthen employer and provider referral relationships	Develop ongoing local partnerships that lead to successful job matches and placements
Create or join coalitions, associations, and networks	Bring together a cross section of civic, business, and disability leadership to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities
Create a local government liaison for employers	Establish a dedicated city or county position to outreach, educate, and support career preparation opportunities and employment by private and public employers
Build awareness and share resources	Strategies for providing education, training, resources, and information to people with disabilities, families, current and prospective employers, and other community members
Educate and inform the community	Utilize a variety of formats (i.e., online, presentations, tours, tool kits) to create greater awareness, dispel myths, share best practices, and provide practical resources on job supports, reasonable accommodations, and hiring
Showcase what works	Draw attention through the media to stories of success about employees with disabilities, successful programs, and business practices
Show appreciation and recognize exemplary employers	Support and recognize the achievements of employers for their recruiting, employing, and retaining employees with disabilities
Prepare youth and adults with disabilities for work	Strategies for educators and parents to prepare people with disabilities for the transition to work through self-determination, career development, and networking in their community
Provide career preparation experience	Expand work-based learning opportunities through internships, apprenticeships, and mentoring
Start transition from school to work early	Expose K–12 and postsecondary students to career pathways and work experience
Involve parents in identifying community resources and employers	Utilize parents' community networks to educate and outreach to community members and potential employers who may assist them in securing employment for their child
Develop self-determination skills	Equip youth and adults with the skills, attitudes, and opportunities to play an active role in their own career development
Prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology	Educate and train on the use of media to job search and demonstrate their employment skills
Streamline application and hiring practices	Strategies that strengthen relationships and communication with employers about existing jobs and remove barriers to getting hired by people with disabilities
Centralize job listings	Create an accessible centralized database or job board with easy access for people with disabilities, providers, and employers
Create a good job match	Improve the communication and process for identifying skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities and the requirements of existing jobs
Individualize the hiring process	Implement policies and practices that accommodate or allow for an alternative application process to improve success in being hired
Connect with personnel responsible for hiring	Strengthen and grow business relationships with employers and management responsible for hiring including human resources and hiring managers
Prioritize employment of people with disabilities	Strategies to develop and change services for employment and incentivize employers to hire
Strengthen the service delivery system	Change policies, organize services differently, and enhance funding to properly prepare and support people with disabilities to transition into successful and permanent employment
Use or develop incentives to hire	Develop new or use current tax and other business incentives to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities
Improve transportation access	Increase access and availability of transportation to jobs
Modernize skills of service providers	Educate the service provider community on the use of social media and technology in the job search and hiring process

Table 3. Occurrence (%) of Strategic Themes and Subcategories Across All Sites.

Theme/category	Site						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Building partnerships with employers	36.9	36.9	28.8	33.3	31.1	21.2	28.0
Increase employer to employer outreach	13.8	6.5	5.1	2.4	14.8	0.0	8.0
Strengthen provider and employer referral relationships	6.2	0.0	6.8	4.8	4.9	5.8	4.0
Create or join coalitions, associations, and networks	13.8	30.4	15.3	26.2	9.8	13.5	13.3
Create a local government liaison for employers	3.1	0.0	1.7	0.0	1.6	1.9	2.7
Building awareness and share resources	21.5	26.1	20.3	23.8	8.2	53.8	34.7
Educate and inform the community	13.8	15.2	13.6	19.0	6.6	44.2	20.0
Showcase what works	4.6	8.7	5.1	4.8	1.6	9.6	2.7
Show appreciation and recognize exemplary employers	3.1	2.2	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0
Prepare youth and adults with disabilities for work	15.4	19.6	10.2	28.6	13.1	5.8	21.3
Provide career preparation experience	9.2	6.5	3.4	2.4	4.9	0.0	4.0
Start transition from school to work early	3.1	2.2	1.7	16.7	1.6	1.9	2.7
Involve parents in transition to work	1.5	0.0	0.0	9.5	0.0	0.0	5.3
Develop self-determination skills	0.0	10.9	3.4	0.0	3.3	3.8	2.7
Prepare youth and adults to use social media and technology	1.5	0.0	1.7	0.0	3.3	0.0	6.7
Streamline application and hiring process	9.2	8.7	37.3	2.4	18.0	13.5	14.7
Centralize job listings	0.0	4.3	11.9	0.0	3.3	9.6	1.3
Create a good job match	1.5	4.3	6.8	0.0	0.0	1.9	6.7
Individualize hiring process	0.0	0.0	10.2	0.0	8.2	0.0	1.3
Connect with personnel responsible for hiring	7.7	0.0	8.5	2.4	6.6	1.9	5.3
Prioritize employment of people with disabilities	16.9	8.7	3.4	11.9	11.5	5.8	1.3
Strengthen service delivery system	12.3	4.3	3.4	4.8	3.3	0.0	0.0
Use or develop incentives to hire	3.1	4.3	0.0	2.4	4.9	3.8	1.3
Improve transportation access	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	0.0	1.9	0.0
Modernize skills of service providers	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.3	0.0	0.0
Total number of coded strategies	65	46	59	42	61	52	75

efforts to hire and retain people with disabilities. The idea to *educate and inform* about employment and the unique needs of people with disabilities were the second most often mentioned strategy across all conversations. Potential recipients of information included Chambers of Commerce, hiring managers, students with and without disabilities, employers, and organizations. Examples of information dissemination suggested by participants included presentations, training sessions, informal conversations, tool kits, and websites. In regard to content, the recommendations primarily focused on the need for disability awareness in general and more specifically about the value of people with disabilities as an untapped workforce for businesses. Participants also saw the benefits of harnessing the power and influence of all forms of media to *showcase what works*, such as generating radio spots and public service announcements (PSAs). Participants mentioned the importance of *recognizing and showing appreciation to exemplary employers* by taking the "time to acknowledge business(es) that are employing people with disabilities." Taken together, these recommended strategies create greater exposure and awareness of the unique employment needs of people with disabilities, dispel myths, and offer successful examples and recognition to employers already hiring people with disabilities, which has the potential to encourage other employers to do so.

Theme 3: Prepare Youth and Young Adults With Disabilities for Work

The third most prominent theme addressed specific strategies for educators and parents to *prepare youth and young adults for the transition to work* ($n = 64$, 16% of all strategies). Participants mentioned the importance of exposing youth with disabilities to careers and work as young as possible. They recommended *starting transition from school to work early* so there is a more natural flow and realistic expectation for work. Strategies included transition fairs to impart information to families, inclusive education and work experiences, and early exposure to community employers. Early preparation should also include the *development of self-determination skills*, including building self-esteem

Table 4. Percentage (Frequency) of Attendees' Perception of the Value of Participation and Community Readiness by Site.

Participation/readiness responses	Site						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Value of participation[a]							
The meeting was a good use of my time.	92.7 (51)	93.8 (30)	100.0 (38)	100.0 (32)	100.0 (53)	97.6 (40)	100.0 (54)
I learned something new about my community.	92.6 (50)	84.4 (27)	97.4 (37)	96.9 (31)	96.1 (49)	95.0 (38)	100.0 (55)
People came up with good ideas.	94.4 (51)	93.8 (30)	100.0 (37)	96.9 (31)	100.0 (53)	97.6 (40)	94.5 (52)
I know what I can do next to increase employment for people with disabilities.	87.3 (48)	90.6 (29)	84.2 (32)	93.5 (29)	88.2 (45)	82.5 (33)	90.7 (49)
Views on participation[b]							
Attending this event was a good investment of my time.	85.7 (24)	91.3 (21)	100.0 (19)	100.0 (10)	100.0 (21)	94.7 (18)	86.8 (33)
Community readiness[a]							
People in our community are open to employing people with disabilities.	81.8 (45)	68.8 (22)	86.8 (33)	71.0 (22)	86.5 (45)	87.5 (35)	70.4 (38)
Our community has the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs.	83.6 (46)	81.3 (26)	92.1 (35)	96.9 (31)	94.3 (50)	92.7 (38)	88.7 (47)
There are strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families in my community.	61.8 (34)	62.5 (20)	73.7 (28)	43.8 (14)	62.3 (33)	70.0 (28)	60.0 (33)
We need to take action on employing people with disabilities in our community.	92.7 (51)	84.4 (27)	100.0 (38)	100.0 (31)	98.1 (51)	97.6 (40)	96.3 (52)
Community readiness[b]							
My community will take action to employ more people with disabilities.	77.8 (21)	68.2 (15)	83.3 (15)	60.0 (6)	90.0 (18)	84.2 (16)	77.8 (28)

[a]Participant survey. [b]Follow-up survey.

and self-confidence. Recommended strategies focused on the ways in which youth and young adults could acquire *career preparation experience* including paid and unpaid internships, apprenticeships, job fairs, and tours of job sites. For example, one participant recommended leveraging resources at a local community college to reestablish a credit-bearing course for student internships in private business. "This gives good training and often, unpaid internships lead to employment." These experiences should be explicitly linked to potential career paths. Some participants suggested strategies for engaging parents in the transition process to help identify community resources and potential employers. Other suggestions included *involving parent leaders or creating a parent network* to identify community resources and outreach to potential employers and other community members to broaden opportunities for employment.

Theme 4: Streamline Application and Hiring Practices

The fourth theme focused on specific strategies to help people with disabilities find jobs more easily and simplify the application and hiring process ($n = 62$, 15.5% of all strategies). The recommended ideas included actions that could be taken by employers, by others assisting the person with a disability to get work, or both. One example included creating an accessible centralized database for persons with disabilities, employers, and providers. Participants recommended strategies that included *individualizing the hiring process* and for providers to have direct *access to key personnel responsible for hiring*. In addition, some participants recommended strategies (e.g., contact and communication) that would foster greater collaboration between providers and employers to *create a good job match* between the requisite skills for a position and the abilities of the applicant with a disability.

Theme 5: Prioritize Employment of People With Disabilities

The fifth theme addressed strategies to *prioritize the employment of people with disabilities* ($n = 62$, 15.5% of all strategies) through changes in policy and practices. Participants emphasized more "out of the box" and "innovative" approaches are needed to work with employers,

perspective employers, and community members. It was also recommended that employers learn about existing *tax and other business incentives* to hire people with disabilities and that additional incentives be developed as a motivation for employers. Other recommended strategies aimed to *strengthen the service delivery system* by increasing funding to expand the availability of job coaches and improve *transportation access* to jobs. Participants mentioned the need to *modernize the skill set of service providers* to better connect people with disabilities to employers. For example, service providers need to update their skills in technology to effectively assist their clients to look for, network, and apply for a job. An employer participant offered to help local providers "bring their job search skills into the 21st century," including the use of social media (e.g., LinkedIn).

Value of Participation

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the community conversation was a good use of their time (range = 92.7%−100%, $M = 97.7%$). This sentiment was reaffirmed on the follow-up survey (range = 85.7%−100%, $M = 94.1%$; see Table 4). Likewise, participants agreed that people came up with good ideas (range = 93.8%−100%, $M = 96.7%$). Participants, for the most part, also learned something new about their community (range = 84.4%−100%, $M = 94.6%$). Furthermore, most participants responded that they knew what to do next to increase employment for people with disabilities (range = 82.5%−93.5%, $M = 88.1%$).

Community Readiness

In general, participants seemed to feel that their community needed to take action on employing people with disabilities in their community (range = 84.4%−100%, $M = 95.6%$). Although the majority agreed their community had the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs (range = 81.3%−96.9%, $M = 89.9%$), far fewer felt people in their community were open to employing people with disabilities (range = 68.8%−85.8%, $M = 79.0%$). There was more variation and less agreement by respondents in feeling that there were strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families in their community (range = 43.8%−73.7%, $M = 62.0%$). Respondents also varied in their belief that their community would take action to employ more people with disabilities as reported on the follow-up survey (range = 60.0%−90.0%, $M = 77.3%$).

Participants responding to the follow-up survey identified several activities their community should focus on within the next 6 months to increase the employment of people with disabilities. As one participant stated, "The most important things that can be done to increase the employment of people with disabilities is to just increase awareness. Have employers speak out and let others know how beneficial it is to hire individuals with disabilities." In

addition, it is important to acknowledge the employers who have hired people with disabilities, share success stories both from the employee with disability and employer perspective, and utilize various media outlets to share these success stories.

Discussion

The first inklings of change are occurring since the passage of California's EF Policy. Between 2013 and 2015 there was an increase in the percentage of individuals served in integrated employment services from 12.5% to 13.1% and annual earnings increased from US$6,490 to US$6,758 (California Department of Developmental Services, 2013–2014, 2014–2015). Given that there had been minimal, if any, change in employment for individuals with IDD, this suggests that policies such as the EF policy are important in supporting change. However, it is the implementation of policy at the local level that creates change in the lives of individuals. Therefore, it is the communities that are tasked with identifying the solutions and strategies that work toward a particular goal. In line with previous research by Carter et al. (2014; Carter et al., 2016), we found that community conversations offer insights into existing solutions and available resources by a diverse group of community members toward addressing the intractable problem of employment for people with disabilities. Recommendations from our community conversations pointed to the potential influencers for change and specific strategies that can improve employment outcomes.

In policy and practice, there is growing recognition of the need to engage employers for successful employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. The primary recommendation emanating from the community conversations was focused on ways to build partnerships with employers. The specific strategies indicated employers would respond best to messages from their peers, in essence hearing the experiences of other employers in working with individuals with disabilities. It is a fellow employer who can speak to what is important to the employer, who is getting a good employee, and who is satisfying their "bottom line" (National Governors Association, 2013). There is also a need for service providers to develop relationships with employers so that they are aware of employer expectations and can better provide any supports an individual with IDD needs to perform his or her job. These recommendations are consistent with current literature, policies (WIOA), and practices calling for stronger alignment between the demand side perspective (Luecking, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The WIOA specifically stipulates multiple and new levels of engagement for employers within the workforce system including advisory boards, mock interviews, and internships.

While additional themes focused on ways services provider and families could better prepare and support the

employment of people with disabilities, the employer perspective continued to be an important one to include. For example, the second theme about building awareness was speaking to the need for employers to be exposed to positive stories about working with an individual with IDD and building awareness of abilities of individuals with disabilities. Employer participants offered to help prepare individuals with IDD and other disabilities for jobs by conducting mock interviews, training providers on recent technology, and speaking to other similar companies about their experiences. Conversely, other participants were able to contribute feedback on what would make the application and hiring process more accessible to individuals with disabilities and raise awareness about barriers to that process. For example, online applications can present difficulties for individuals with IDD. Research by the Partnership and Employment and Accessible Technology (n.d.) echoes this point, finding that 46% of the individuals with disabilities surveyed rated their experience applying online as "difficult to impossible."

Findings from the participant feedback survey and follow-up survey indicate varying levels of optimism about moving communities toward hiring more people with disabilities. For the most part, participants recognized the need for their community to take action on employing people with disabilities and believed that their community had the ability (resources) to do so. However, there appears to be a disconnect between beliefs about its importance and community capacity with the perceived openness by community members to hire individuals with disabilities. For example, Community D had the highest percentage of respondents who felt their community had the ability to get more people with disabilities in good jobs. Conversely, respondents from the same community had the lowest percentage who believed their community would take action to employ more people with disabilities. This feeling may be related to a lack of agreement that strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families existed in their community. Building partnerships with employers was recognized in the conversations as a central recommendation to increasing employment of people with disabilities. These findings suggest that partnership building is not simply a possible strategy, but an essential strategy in creating changes at the local level.

Policy change has been found to be more effective when state-level leadership is attentive to state and local context, reinforces critical values, provides capacity building activities, and supports promising practices (Furney, Hasazi, & Destefano, 1997). In furtherance of the EF Policy, the California Department of Education (CDE), Rehabilitation (DOR), and Developmental Services (DDS) in collaboration with Disability Rights California entered into an agreement and recently crafted the California CIE Blueprint ("Blueprint"). It provides a framework for collaboration and coordination across the agencies to support the achievement of CIE. The Blueprint for the first time sets benchmarks and expectations for CIE, delineates agency roles and responsibilities, and proposes pathways for individuals with IDD to achieve CIE. Recognizing the importance of local communities in improving CIE outcomes for individuals with IDD, the Blueprint calls for the development of Local Partnership Agreements. The Blueprint sets the expectation that the local equivalent of the state agencies representing education, rehabilitation, and developmental services will be a key strategy used by local communities to increase CIE outcomes for individuals with IDD and will serve as models for the state (CDE, DOR, & DDS, 2017a). The Local Partnership Agreements template reinforces the importance of employer engagement voiced in our community conversations by advising the inclusion of business partners in the agreement (CDE, DOR, & DDS, 2017b). Potential linkages can increase CIE by expanding outreach and engagement with business partners, increasing awareness of the business community of the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities, alerting service providers and consumers of job opportunities, and providing training to other businesses.

Study Limitations

Caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study. The event is intentionally time limited, fast-paced, and solution driven. The structure of the conversation does not lend itself to asking clarifying questions that might provide a more detailed understanding of an idea or action. Future research would lend itself to audio or video recording for the community conversation to capture the richness of the conversations and ideas generated. As mentioned above, although community conversations strive to bring together a diverse cross section representing the community as a whole, not all roles are equally represented. Future community conversation research may systematically look at how LPTs and conversation participants may or may not affect the types of strategies recommended. The pool of strategies from the harvest was limited to our notetakers documentation as our table hosts' notes were incomplete or illegible. Future work might also consider an additional follow-up survey 4 to 6 months after the event to ascertain whether the actions generated were being acted upon by community members (Trainor et al., 2012). Related, future community conversations may further explore this gap between what it takes to get from belief to action for their particular question.

Conclusion

Recent state and federal policies reflect a growing expectation for competitive, integrated employment outcomes. To achieve success, state agencies are working toward

anchoring their policies and practices to the overall objective of employment and local implementation. Communities are challenged to develop, modify, and align their practices with this policy objective. Community conversations offer a useful approach to bring together diverse stakeholders and community members to identify existing resources and possible solutions to large-scale issues such as employment. A strength of this approach is that it allowed us access to employers, a group central to employment and historically a difficult group for service provider agencies to engage. Through the community conversations, employers, service providers, families, and individuals with disabilities were able to learn from each other. It also provided an opportunity to initiate potential partnerships. In addition to specific strategies recommended, a central theme of partnership building with employers emerged. The CDE, DDS, and DOR echo these findings by advocating Local Partnership Agreements to align with the state's EF policy. It is the community itself that must develop strategies that will work, given its unique resources and services. The success of state policy will be realized and indicated through the success of local communities to implement it.

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