

# Building a Pathway Forward

The **Minnesota Transformation Initiative Technical Assistance Center (MTI)** is funded by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) with the goal of expanding statewide capacity for employment and community participation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Housed within the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota, MTI works collaboratively with key partners, including The Arc MN, Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and Strengths at Work LLC.

During its first two years of work, MTI supported employment services providers transitioning from subminimum-wage employment and/or expanding their employment capacity to support people to find regular jobs in the community. MTI also trained hundreds of staff from providers and counties across the state, created a peer mentorship program for people with disabilities, and developed a framework to guide lead agencies to improve employment outcomes. The dividends of investing in capacity building are realized over time, manifesting in sustained growth, enhanced resilience, and long-term success. While immediate results may not always be visible, the enduring impact becomes evident through strengthened capabilities and improved performance. This brief report highlights MTI's key outcomes, activities, and lessons learned during its first two years (May 2022–June 2024) and outlines key strategies to drive continued progress toward inclusive employment and community engagement.



## Provider Reinvention Grants: Technical Assistance for Employment Transformation

As part of its work, MTI provided technical assistance to Minnesota providers that received two types of provider reinvention grants aimed at supporting employment services.

### Key Outcomes & Activities

MTI supported 8 providers that were awarded Transition to Competitive Wages (TCW) grants to develop and implement business plans to phase out subminimum wages. By the end of the provider grant period, seven had ended their use of subminimum wage and one was well underway.

- 98% of workers with disabilities were no longer receiving subminimum wages.
- No one lost services because of their provider's transformation.
- Those no longer receiving subminimum wages spend their days in a variety of ways. Many receive a combination of services throughout the week.
  - 42% were working at community businesses in groups with other people with disabilities and a job coach,
  - 38% were working alongside other people with disabilities in jobs at a building owned by the provider, and
  - 5% were working in regular jobs in the community.
  - 58% of people were participating in non-work recreation and leisure activities at a building owned by the provider,
  - 38% were participating in non-work recreation and leisure activities in their communities, and
  - 3% had a volunteer job.

## Examples of transformation from Transition to Competitive Wages (TCW) grant recipients:

One provider committed fully to transforming their service model. During the grant period, they focused on identifying goals, changing agency culture, and training staff to prepare to support more people to work in jobs in their community at competitive wages and to engage in non-work hobbies and activities in their community rather than a provider-owned center. This provider continues receiving technical assistance from MTI since the provider grants ended and is actively working toward a goal of supporting 100 people to find regular jobs by the summer of 2026.

A large provider in the Twin Cities worked intensively with the hundreds of people they supported who received subminimum wages and had jobs in a provider-owned building to make a choice about how they wanted to spend their days going forward. While some wanted to pursue a regular job in their community, many chose the “stepping stone” approach and moved from work in the provider-owned center to a job at a community business alongside a job coach and other people with disabilities. Others chose to retire and engage in non-work recreation and leisure activities at a provider-owned building.

One provider, originally planning minimal changes, built a new service model from scratch to support competitive integrated employment. This involved process development, agency culture changes, and staff training. Their new model is beginning to show success, and they have begun supporting people who previously worked in subminimum wage jobs to find independent jobs in their community.

One small provider in rural Minnesota did not significantly change its services in order to end subminimum wages. The provider continued to offer group jobs in their community, employ people on site (but now at or above minimum wage), and provide non-work recreation activities.

- MTI also managed 14 Employment Provider Transition (EPT) grants focused on expanding employment capacity and provided technical assistance to 5 of these providers. Providers used their funding to strengthen their workforces, expand geographic reach in rural communities, and develop services that better serve people with complex support needs. Examples of outcomes achieved by provider grantees include:

- Built relationships with 50 additional employers.
- Developed a program that supports youth graduating from school to find employment.
- Had 20 staff complete specialized training to support people to find regular jobs in the community.
- Created a new transportation program with a goal of serving 60 individuals. By the end of the grant period, they served 159.
- Doubled the initial goal of the number of people supported to find regular jobs in the community (supporting 42 people to find regular jobs by the end of the grant period, double the original goal of 21).
- Developed and began implementing training programs to improve staff retention for its direct support professional workforce.

## Lessons Learned & Future Work

- Organizational transformation takes time and requires resources. Both TCW and EPT grants were short in duration. The grant period, which was less than two years, offered providers time to develop plans for their transformation work and to begin to implement parts of those plans. The grant period did not offer enough time for the participating agencies to fully implement their transformation plans and to realize their employment outcome goals. Several of the providers were only just launching services to support people to find regular jobs in the community at the end of the grant period. However, they established the necessary infrastructure to advance their work, with several launching new employment services. It will take some time to see the full outcomes of the provider grants. Transformation is an ongoing process requiring sustained technical assistance, resources, and support at every stage of implementation.

Ongoing funding for MTI is supporting this transformation work to continue beyond the TCW and EPT grants.

- Based on the lessons learned during its first two years of work, MTI has created a menu of technical assistance and training options for employment and day service providers focusing on expanding capacity for employment and community participation. Key objectives for FY 25-26 include:
  - Cohort technical assistance: Intensive technical assistance to a new cohort of 8 providers focused on expanding capacity for employment and community participation.
  - Targeted technical assistance and training: Support for providers that are unable or not ready to participate in intensive technical assistance through the cohort model on topics related to increasing capacity for employment and community participation by request.
  - High support needs pilot: Develop and implement a model to assist providers in achieving employment and community participation outcomes for individuals with high support needs.

## Training and Mentorship: Building Capacity across Minnesota

In the first two years of its work, MTI created a peer mentorship program for people with disabilities and their families, provided professional peer mentorship to interested providers, trained hundreds of staff across Minnesota, and connected staff, organizations, and families to resources.

### Key Outcomes & Activities

- 800 people throughout the state participated in MTI's virtual webinar series on employment and community participation.
- 60 direct support professionals were trained through 3 in-person trainings delivered in partnership with MN APSE in Greater Minnesota (Little Falls, Brainerd, and Mankato).
- 20 mid-level managers from organizations undergoing organizational transformation participated in MTI's 8-month leadership training program.

## Individual stories illustrate the effects these changes have had in people's lives:

After working for decades in a provider-owned warehouse-like building doing simple, contracted tasks for subminimum wage, one individual transitioned to new options when the provider closed the facility. A specialized employment staff guided them through their options: a group job alongside other people with disabilities and a job coach at a community business for minimum wage, finding a regular job in the community, or attending a center offering recreation and leisure activities. The person and their family chose a group job two days a week, spending the other three days participating in recreation and leisure activities at a center owned by the provider.

After his provider ended subminimum wages, one individual continued working two days a week in a group cleaning job at minimum wage while receiving support at his apartment. Through MTI's assistance, his provider added new services to support people to find regular jobs in the community. Expressing interest in a community job, he worked with a trained staff person to identify his skills and interests and landed his first individual job as a janitor at a small local business in his community.

- 20 mid-level managers received MTI scholarships to attend 2023 MOHR Spring Conference; MTI led organizational transformation tracks at the MOHR Spring Conference in 2023 and 2024.
- Multiple self-advocates from across the state were trained to serve as peer mentors, amplifying the voices of people with disabilities and their families statewide.

### Lessons Learned & Future Work

- While many excellent resources for families and organizations already exist (e.g., **Disability Hub MN**), they are often underutilized because stakeholders are either unaware of them or struggle to locate them.

- High-quality day supports that complement employment services are critical. These services help individuals build skills, relationships, and natural supports while encouraging exploration of employment opportunities. They also provide vital supplementary supports for people who do not work full-time but need or desire other supports to access their communities. The concept of achieving community participation through high-quality day supports is still fairly new in Minnesota. More training and resources are needed for all stakeholders on this topic, and will be an area of development for MTI in its future work.
- Based on the lessons learned in its first two years, MTI will continue to develop and deliver needed trainings and resources on topics relevant to employment and community participation. MTI will also focus on identifying and improving access to existing resources, educating stakeholders about their availability and utility. Key objectives for FY 25-26 include:
  - Launch annual cohorts of the management and leadership course to support provider leadership teams.
  - Conduct a needs assessment to identify professional development priorities at provider organizations and use results to develop a training plan and resources.
  - Continue delivering a regular training series on topics aimed at strengthening capacity for employment and community participation across stakeholders.
  - Develop outreach plan to connect and engage with key statewide and regional stakeholders to increase collaboration.
  - Review available trainings, tools, and resources and develop a plan to update, compile, etc. resources to improve access.
  - Create and pilot new methods of connecting stakeholders to resources and information (i.e., newsletter, podcast, improved website) and increasing meaningful utilization of those resources.

## A story of excellence:

Udac: In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership team at Udac in Duluth committed to transforming their service model from center-based day and employment services to supports offered entirely in the community. During their early planning conversations, the Udac team determined that they wanted to become a “center of excellence” in providing high-quality, person-centered, community-based supports. With the support of MTI technical assistance, Udac is well on their way to achieving this goal. Today, Udac supports 35 people in employment services (25 of whom are employed competitively) and 31 people in employment-focused community-based day supports. Udac was recognized nationally for its transformation successes when it received the 2023 Organizational Best Practice Award from the Association of People Supporting Employment First.

## County-Level Support: Building a Foundation for Future Work

In the first two years of its work, MTI also began laying a foundation for working directly with county agencies. MTI piloted training and support to 4 counties to enhance employment outcomes. MTI also piloted a training series for case managers and supervisors in two regions to strengthen collaboration and service delivery.

## Lessons Learned & Future Work

- From a national perspective, Minnesota’s counties play a unique role in the assessment and authorization of disability services, which requires a state-specific framework to guide counties to increase employment outcomes. The training and support that MTI piloted with counties during its first two years were used to inform the development of a technical



assistance framework that is guiding support for the Lead Agency Capacity Building Grants in 2024-2026.

- Counties cannot achieve increased employment outcomes on their own. Realizing Minnesota's Employment First policy requires statewide, regional, and local partnerships. Providers, counties, Vocational Rehabilitation Services offices, and employers must work together to prioritize employment outcomes.
- In its future work, MTI will expand its work with counties by supporting counties receiving Lead Agency Capacity Building Grants to develop and implement an action plan to increase employment outcomes. Key objectives for FY 25-26 include:
  - Utilize the lead agency technical assistance framework developed in FY 2024 to support 6 counties receiving the Lead Agency Capacity Building Grants to increase employment outcomes in the areas they serve.
  - Use learnings from work with counties and providers to provide planning and guidance to DHS on employment-related policy and data tracking strategies.

## Conclusion

MTI's work over the past two years has demonstrated that transforming organizations and systems to increase employment and community participation for people with disabilities takes time and investment, but it can be done when stakeholders are dedicated and focused on their vision. Moving forward, MTI remains committed to supporting providers, counties, and stakeholders at every stage of their transformation journey. By identifying and addressing support needs, streamlining resources, and fostering collaboration, Minnesota is poised to realize its vision of inclusive employment and vibrant community engagement for all.

## One provider's journey:

Lake County DAC's story highlights the time and investment required for a successful transformation. In 2018, the Executive Director of Lake County DAC in Two Harbors, Minnesota, felt stuck. At the time, Lake County DAC offered only prevocational and day support services. The Director sensed that supporting people to find regular jobs in the community was the way of the future, but she struggled to get buy-in from staff. She applied for Lake County DAC to receive technical assistance on organizational transformation as part of a two-year project led by the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration and the University of Massachusetts – Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion. This proved to be a game-changer for Lake County DAC. With the support of their technical assistance team, Lake County DAC re-trained staff and began offering employment services. When Lake County DAC staff helped a person supported by the organization to get their dream job at the local gas station, the floodgates opened. Suddenly, many people wanted a job in the community, and staff had bought in to the transformation.

Technical assistance ended in 2020, but the director and her team kept moving forward with transformation. In 2024, Lake County DAC supported 20 people in a town of about 3600 people on the North Shore. Eight of those people worked in regular jobs in the community. In the spring of 2024, Lake County DAC ended their long-time recycling contract with the county. The savings in workers' compensation and insurance helped make this transition financially viable. The organization ended its 14c subminimum wage certificate when it expired at the end of 2024, and the two people remaining in subminimum wage jobs chose to transition into services that provide recreation, leisure, and community participation. Still evolving, Lake County DAC has plans to expand and innovate the services they offer for employment and community participation.