
**Assessment of Supported and Sheltered
Employment in St. Louis County:
Views of Consumers, Caregivers, and Employers**

**Executive Summary, Conclusions and
Recommendations**

Prepared for
The Productive Living Board
for St. Louis County Citizens with Developmental Disabilities

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Executive Summary

This study examined supported and sheltered employment and employment services in St. Louis County. The study population consisted of persons with developmental disabilities who had worked in competitive jobs or sheltered workshops between July 1, 1993 and June 30, 1994. The findings reported here are based on survey responses from 64 consumers, 352 primary caregivers (including 258 family members, mostly parents), 94 employers of supported workers, and 42 companies doing business with sheltered workshops, as well as analyses of a variety of data sources including annual and quarterly reports of service providers. In addition, interviews were conducted with consumers, consumer families, agency and workshop personnel. Typically, the analyses carried out in the study distinguish between three sets of workers: 1) those in supported, competitive employment, 2) those in competitive jobs who received placement services with limited follow-up, and 3) those in sheltered workshops.

An important context and starting point for understanding the results of this study is provided by earlier research conducted by the Institute that examined family support needs and client satisfaction with the broad set of services provided to families and persons with developmental disabilities in St. Louis County. This previous study, *Family Support Needs and Client Satisfaction*, found that employment services were among the services with which consumer families were most satisfied, whether this involved supported or sheltered employment. This finding was confirmed in the present study which looked in greater detail at employment and employment services in the lives of many more working consumers.

Work Issues. Consumers in sheltered workshops had been in their current jobs considerably longer on average (9.0 years) than consumers in competitive jobs (2.3 years). Consumers in competitive jobs were more likely to have worked in sheltered workshops than vice versa. Thirty-five percent of the workers in supported employment and 55 percent of the workers in the placement group had once worked in a sheltered workshop. Fewer workshop consumers, 16 percent, had some experience in competitive employment.

The mean hourly wage of supported workers was \$4.39. They worked an average of 27 hours per week. Their mean projected annual salary was \$5,936. Reports from agency personnel indicated that some parents did not want their children's income to

exceed the limit that would disqualify them for SSI.¹ Workers in the placement group had a mean hourly wage of \$6.67 (although if clients of the Epilepsy Foundation were excluded it was \$4.80.) They worked an average of 34 hours per week and had a projected average annual salary of \$11,832.51, \$6,863 excluding Epilepsy Foundation clients.) Workers in sheltered workshops had a mean hourly wage of \$1.86 and worked an average of 28 hours per week. Their projected average annual salary was \$1,762.

Consumers in supported employment had job-related benefits similar to other workers in low paying jobs: 43 percent had paid holidays; 42 percent had paid vacations, 26 percent received medical benefits; 15 percent had paid sick leave; and 8 percent participated in retirement plans. All workers in sheltered workshops had paid vacations and, in all but one shop, paid holidays. Paid sick leave was not available in most workshops, nor were medical benefits.

There was twice as much job movement reported that was within job categories than between them. That is, it was more common that workers moved from one workshop to another or from one competitive job to another than from a workshop to a competitive job or from a competitive job to one in a workshop. Workers who had left workshops for competitive jobs were likely to experience a raise in pay (67% of the time) and an increase in job responsibilities (81%). Workers who moved from competitive to sheltered employment more often experienced a drop in pay and a diminishing of job responsibilities. However, 8 out of 10 caregivers and consumers were likely to prefer the new jobs to the old ones wherever they were. Consumers who moved into workshops were able to do so much quicker (median time between jobs: 30 days) than consumers moving into competitive jobs (median time between jobs: 61 days).

All of the community agencies who assisted consumers obtain competitive jobs and most of the sheltered workshops maintained applicant waiting lists. Both the absolute and relative numbers of applicants on competitive employment waiting lists were greater. Eight agencies that provide supported employment reported a total of 162 consumers waiting for such placements. The five sheltered workshops which maintained waiting lists reported a total of 86 consumers waiting for workshop placement. The waiting lists of community agencies contained 1 person waiting for a competitive job for every 2.4 in a competitive job. The waiting lists of sheltered workshops contained 1 person waiting for sheltered employment for every 5.9 persons in a workshop job.

Just over 1 consumer in 10 in the study population were on a waiting list for a different job at the time of the study. Among all consumers in competitive jobs 9 percent were waiting for different competitive jobs while 2 percent were waiting for jobs in sheltered workshops. Among all sheltered employees, 3 percent were waiting for jobs in other workshops and 8 percent were waiting for competitive jobs.² Only one workshop

¹This despite provisions that ensure no loss in total income. Once wages reach \$500 per month, SSI payments are reduced by \$1.00 for every \$2.00 earned.

² As will be seen below, these workshop consumers on waiting lists for competitive employment form part of a larger group who along with their primary caregivers would prefer competitive jobs in the community.

regularly facilitated the transitioning of a portion of its work force into competitive employment as a matter of policy.

Workshop operators all reported that they accepted back former workers who left to take competitive jobs. If the length of time away exceeded a specified time limit--from 3 months up to 2 years depending on the workshop--the worker would be placed on the waiting list and treated like any other applicant.

Caregiver Satisfaction. Nearly three-quarters of the caregivers surveyed reported satisfaction with the employment services consumers received as well as with the consumer's current job. This included caregivers of consumers in competitive and sheltered employment. The parents of consumers were somewhat more positive in their evaluations than other primary caregivers, especially those with agency affiliations.

Nearly all (97%) parents and other caregivers of consumers in competitive jobs preferred such jobs over sheltered ones. Seventy-five percent of the caregivers of consumers in sheltered workshops said they preferred workshops to competitive employment, while 25 percent (16% of parents) said they would prefer competitive employment. For a majority of caregivers, their stated preferences represented a strong predisposition in favor of the type of setting, competitive or sheltered, in which the consumer was currently working.

A large majority (over 70%) of caregivers of consumers in both supported and sheltered employment reported satisfaction with most specific features of the jobs of consumers. This included where the consumer worked and the type of work performed, the times and amount of work, the safety of working conditions, the friendliness of work supervisors and co-workers, and the job as a source of self-esteem. Caregivers of sheltered workers were more likely to be satisfied with the number of hours worked per week, the specific times worked, the stability of the job, and the fact that the job provided consumers opportunities to make new friends and to interact with peers with similar disabilities. Caregivers of supported workers were more likely to be satisfied with the pay rate and the fairness of wages paid, that the job was viewed by the community as a real job and provided the consumer opportunities to be a part of the community and to interact with persons without disabilities.

Caregivers described many features of jobs as highly important to them. Among them were the job's safety, the friendliness of the workplace, job stability, that the consumer liked the job and that the job was a source of self-esteem. These issues were of equal importance to caregivers of supported and sheltered workers. Caregivers of supported workers, however, wanted more than this. They placed a greater value (than caregivers of sheltered workers) on jobs that were considered real jobs by the community, that integrated the worker into the community and provided opportunities to interact regularly with persons who were not disabled, that enhanced consumer independence and control over his or her own life, that paid a fair wage and matched the consumer's skills and abilities. These issues were of equal important to caregivers of male and female consumers.

Consumer Satisfaction. A majority of consumers reported that they liked their jobs. Over three in four in both sheltered workshops and supported employment said they liked their jobs "very much." More than three out of four supported employment workers said they liked their co-workers and their supervisors very much. A majority of sheltered workers, although not as large a majority, expressed similar feelings for their co-workers and work supervisors (over 60%). Similarly, over 6 in 10 sheltered workers and more than 7 in 10 supported workers described their co-workers as friendly. Approximately the same percentage (over 60%) of both sets of workers said they felt very safe on the job; 14 percent of sheltered workers and 3 percent of supported workers said they did not.

Supported workers were more likely to be very satisfied with their pay than sheltered workers (53% vs. 39%). More sheltered than supported workers said they frequently learned new tasks on their job (57% vs. 36%) and frequently participated in company social events (42% vs. 20%).

A majority of consumers reported that they would prefer to work in the type of work situation they were currently in. This was particularly the case for supported workers, 9 out of 10 said they preferred a competitive job to a sheltered one. Among sheltered workers surveyed, 64 percent said they would rather work in a workshop while 36 percent said they would prefer some other work setting.

Employer Satisfaction. Most employers (91%) who responded to the survey reported satisfaction with supported workers, including 40 percent who said they were very satisfied. Forty-two percent said the workers were doing better than expected. The percent who reported dissatisfaction (9%) was the same as the percent who reported that workers were doing worse than expected. On specific issues, employers rated workers most positively on their attendance, followed by their ability to get along with co-workers and customers. Over 90 percent of employers reported satisfaction with these issues. Over 80 percent were satisfied with the effort and motivation of workers and, importantly, with the amount of supervision and assistance workers needed. Lowest marks were given for work speed, yet three in four reported satisfaction with this. Three-quarters of the respondents said it was highly likely that the worker would still be working with the company in six months, although only a relatively small percentage saw prospects for increases in pay or job responsibilities.

All but a small percentage of workers experienced a high degree of integration on their jobs. According to employers most had either frequent (33%) or continual (62%) contact with co-workers without disabilities at work. Interactions with co-workers were higher in cases where natural supports were utilized.

Nearly all employers responding (98%) said they were satisfied with the services they received from agencies that placed the workers, 55 percent said they were very satisfied. Reported satisfaction was high for the professionalism and availability of

agency staff, the amount of support provided workers and the amount of feedback solicited from employers.

Natural Supports. In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the supported employment model known as "natural supports." In this approach, job training and ongoing assistance are provided to the worker from sources within the workplace itself, from supervisors and co-workers, rather than from job coaches provided by an outside agency. Only one community agency in St. Louis County utilized natural supports as the basic model for providing supported employment. Other agencies, for the most part, have continued to provide traditional supported employment with heavy emphasis on the on-site role of the job coach. Nonetheless, a substantial amount of worker training comes from sources within the workplace. Sixty-four percent of the employers responding to our survey said that the company was primarily responsible for providing on-the-job training to the supported worker. In many of these cases, however, employers reported that agency job coaches provided a significant amount of job training and assistance for some time after placement. Based on the responses of employers, it was estimated that the natural supports model was utilized in approximately 30 percent of supported employment placements in St. Louis County.

Workshop Customers. Only three sheltered workshops shared their customer lists for the survey that was conducted. Nearly all (95%) of the responding companies doing business with the workshops said they were satisfied with the sheltered employment program and the services they received; 69 percent said they were very satisfied. The companies said they utilized workshops because of low costs, quality of work, timely services and, a number reported, because they wanted to benefit persons with disabilities. Survey respondents described a number of benefits for their companies from using workshop services. The dominant reason, however, was that it kept production costs low. Few respondents reported any problems that they experienced when working with sheltered workshops. Nor were many ideas elicited for improving workshop services, other than improved marketing and publicizing services. A couple of respondents reported an interest in having enclave units from the workshop working at the company's job sites.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The high levels of satisfaction with employment services for persons with developmental disabilities in St. Louis County--on the part of caregivers, consumers and employers--make a strong case for "more of the same," and argue against major changes in PLB philosophy or practices in this area. Waiting lists of new applicants for employment services and those in the system desiring different services than what they are getting make a counter claim for some modifications as well as attention to cost effectiveness.

2. There are caregivers and consumers who would prefer competitive employment although currently involved in sheltered workshops. There are also some, although fewer, currently involved in competitive employment with a preference for sheltered workshops. Consideration should be given to establishing routinized, system-wide procedures for identifying and facilitating movement of consumers into the type of employment setting (sheltered or competitive) that they and their caregivers prefer. Such procedures should be monitored by a disinterested party and ensure the notification of all impacted parties of any resulting activity. A rudimentary transition plan may be the only way to ensure objectives and responsibilities are sufficiently recognized. Such a plan should include fail-safe agreements specifying the terms for the consumer's return to his or her former situation.

3. Only one sheltered workshop serving St. Louis County residents, as a matter of policy and working in coordination with community agencies, facilitates the transition of workers into competitive, community employment. Other workshops should be encouraged to adopt similar policies and procedures. This is consistent with national policy as articulated in The Americans with Disabilities Act (Public Law 101-336), the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 (PL 102-569), and the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (PL 98-527). It is also consistent with the priorities set forth in the Missouri Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities Strategic Plan.

4. Workshops should be encouraged and assisted to develop or expand off-site contract work, enclaves, and mobile crews. Such activities broaden the work experience of consumers in workshops and provide additional community integration for them.

5. In recent years the natural supports model has been increasingly utilized nationwide in supported employment programs. This approach offers the prospect of greater cost-effectiveness for the service system and enhanced integration for the consumer. Only one community agency serving St. Louis County residents has adopted the natural

supports model as its primary approach to supported employment. The experience and expertise of this agency should be shared in a structured way with other agencies (for example, through work shops and technical assistance). Other agencies should be encouraged and assisted to adopt the natural supports model with few exceptions. This will require major changes within these agencies (involving the role and utilization of staff, staff qualifications and training, agency-employer relations, the marketing of services, and the approach to job development).

6. Beyond this, consideration should be given for regular, formal opportunities for the employment staffs of the various agencies to share experiences, exchange strategies, discuss common problems and explore new approaches.

7. Given the relative level of unmet needs, the numbers of consumers on waiting lists, as well as consumer and caregiver preferences, in any reallocation of resources involving employment services priority should be given to competitive job development within a natural supports framework.

8. Consideration should be given to a systematic, independent examination of the process whereby consumers are initially directed into particular employment options. The results of such an examination should be reviewed by a joint committee of representatives of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Regional Center of the Department of Mental Health, the Special School District, PLB, supported employment providers, and sheltered workshops for the purposes of 1) developing principles to guide the selection process (we would assume that consumer and parental desires would be central factors), and 2) establishing procedures that would reduce the influence of any personal biases among system representatives.

9. Consider articulating desired outcomes and performance targets for sheltered and supported employment, and establishing a process or mechanism for monitoring outcomes and performance.

10. Consider developing a unified, automated, on-line applicant/waiting list system for all agencies and workshops.

11. Consider providing customized data management software to community agencies for tracking and reporting on consumers in competitive, community employment. In the near-term, require all consumer-specific reports to include the social security number of consumers to allow for the matching of client lists.

12. Consumers and caregivers should be informed and empowered by affective transition planning while the consumer is in school and by the incorporation of community experiences, including employment, in the consumer's school curriculum. The PLB has made significant contributions in this area as a catalytic agent within the system, through innovative demonstrations and the facilitating efforts of staff. Such activities and efforts should be continued and could be expanded by:

a. Providing whatever assistance might be helpful to the Special School District in establishing a system of aggregating data from individual employment plans and projecting which and how many students in the years ahead will require specific employment services and assistance as they leave school.

b. Providing whatever assistance might be helpful to the Special School District in developing an apprenticeship/practicum program as part of every student's curriculum through 1) the establishment of a county-wide, school-business work experience partnership, and 2) a campaign to market the partnership to county employers. Such an effort would have direct benefits to consumers and their parents, but also would provide a foot in the door in opening up a broader segment of the employer community to adult job developers.

c. Until such time when community work experiences become an integral part of the IEP for all students in Special School District programs, facilitating the establishment of a work exploration program for consumers no longer in school who have had no prior community work experience. Such a program would be similar to what some agencies currently do as part of their assessment process--that is, rotating consumers through a set of temporary paid or unpaid jobs. The primary objective would be to extend such opportunities to a broader set of consumers and to provide them and their caregivers a chance to learn more about their vocational interests and potential for productive work.