

The Arc of New Jersey – Project HIRE Fiscal Year 2021 Summary

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

Fiscal Year 2021 – The Stats

23 field staff members

8.14 average years working for Project HIRE

14 New Jersey counties served

22,953 service hours logged

430 individuals served monthly

138 individuals placed in competitive employment

Staffing

Agencies employing direct support professionals (DSPs) are experiencing extreme turnover. According to recent studies, the national industry average calculates the rate to be 43%. Project HIRE's turnover rate for FY 2019 was reported to be 47%. After this troubling number, the program director developed a new onboarding training program aimed at improving retention of new employees, the most affected area. By assembling a small group made from multiple levels of the agency, a complete overhaul of onboarding was executed and implemented. This initiative was successful in lowering this number, even in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For FY 20, Project HIRE's turnover rate decreased to 37% and now, in FY 21, the program's turnover rate decreased further to 25%, which is just over half the industry average.

A combination of low reimbursement rates and increased regulations on services provided still results in continued low DSP wages. Essentially entry level wages have led to the hire of DSPs with little prior experience in the field, which increases training costs. For these reasons, employers of DSPs, such as Project HIRE are struggling to keep new hires and meet financial incentives. While the low turnover rate is a positive for the program, it simultaneously illustrates the issues plaguing the DSP workforce, low reimbursement rates for DSP services and program growth limitations caused by vacant positions. Vacancies are a major issue and are limiting the program's ability to grow. During FY 21, 3 full time vacancies were not successfully filled and remain open.

When looking at the staff who stayed with the agency through the entirety of FY 21, the average time spent with the agency is just short of 10 years. These staff members have received increases to wages due to seniority with the agency, a major factor in them deciding to stay. Unfortunately, the average time spent by those who left the agency during FY 21 was significantly shorter, just over a year. Because starting wages are so low, agencies like Project HIRE, are not able to hire and retain experienced staff members. Far too often, newly trained staff leave the industry for more lucrative positions with retailers and food services. This makes growth in staffing very difficult. Providers who employ DSPs rely on predetermined rates for services paid for by the State and Medicaid so little adjustment can be made to wages without a substantial increase in these predetermined rates.

Growth in Services Provided

Program growth during FY21 has proven to be difficult, staffing has been a major issue. The "turnover tsunami" of 2021 has opened up 1000s of positions and persons living with disabilities are eager to fill the positions by utilizing employment supports. Unfortunately, while the demand is present, actual staff to meet this demand have been virtually impossible to hire. This issue hampered Project HIRE's plans for expansion in 2021. While the program did provide more hours in FY21 when compared to FY22, the difference was not substantial and more illustrated the program's ability to improve efficiency versus expansion.

Plans for the Next Fiscal Year

A major goal for FY 2020 was an expansion of Transition Services. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the program was poised to grow and had several districts approved for 100s of hours of services. In March of 2020, all schools shut down thereby immediately halting all community services approved. Traditionally, March-May is the period of the year in which the majority of Transition Services are provided so the pandemic could not have hit at a worse time for Project HIRE. However, Project HIRE immediately developed virtual and online alternatives that could be vended safely and according to COVID-19 guidelines. While staffing limited the number of students that could be served, Project HIRE was able to provide virtual services in the fall and spring. Project HIRE has already approved services for in-person activities for the fall with 3 school districts. While staffing has limited the number of students that can be served, the program is in a good position to provide high quality services for students in the community again.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services continues make up the majority of services referred to and provided by Project HIRE. Again, staffing limitations have prevented the program from expanding services dramatically in areas such as Trial Work Experience, Pre-Employment Transition Services and Community Based Work Evaluations. However, traditional services such as pre-placement, intensive and long term have rebounded and Project HIRE is now providing 100s more hours per month of intensive services related to placements of individuals into competitive employment. The demand for these services is high, but maintaining staff to keep up with these demands is expected to be an issue through the remainder of the calendar year.

During fiscal year 2021, Project HIRE provided services to the third Project SEARCH graduating cohort in Union County. Project SEARCH provides a select group of students with the opportunity to participate in a comprehensive internship and training program at the Overlook Medical Center in Summit, New Jersey in place of his or her last year in high school. The 2020/2021 Project SEARCH cohort was a success and the program met all required benchmarks. 3 students from the graduating class are now gainfully employed with Atlantic Health and/or Overlook Medical Center in career areas such as hospitality and patient transport. Project HIRE was again chosen as the provider for the 2021/2022 cohort and is excited to pursue continued positive outcomes for the next graduating class.

While the staffing crisis casts a major shadow over Project HIRE in 2021, the program director does plan to address it head on and has begun research and planning on staff retention utilizing the resources available. First, diversifying funding for the program is a major goal and providing services under the Federally operated, Ticket to Work Program will be a goal for the program in FY 2022. This program aims to help individuals who receive benefits from SSA leave the benefit through gainful work and financial guidance. The service has a relatively low overhead expense and is intended to "attach" to existing programs, like Project HIRE to take advantage of the influence and connections they have in the community to help people become gainfully employed. By diversifying funding sources, income can be used to increase wages for staff, which improves retention, which leads to better services for those living with disabilities. A major problem-area of staff retention in DSP work is the lack of ability to grow within the organization. The program director will also consider the costs and benefits of CESP, or Certified Employment Specialist Professional, training. This certification would allow for staff to provide different services or services of higher quality which could also contribute to greater income and be translated into higher wages. Ideally providing a path for staff to grow within the agency and promote retention of experienced staff members.

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