

The Arc of New Jersey – Project HIRE Fiscal Year 2019 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 2019 – The Stats

27 field staff members

6.8 average years working for Project HIRE

14 New Jersey counties served

27,774 service hours logged

550 individuals served monthly

237 individuals placed in competitive employment

Staffing

Agencies employing direct support professionals (DSPs) are experiencing extreme turnover. The national industry average calculates the rate to be 45%. Project HIRE's turnover rate for FY 2019 reached 65%. A combination of low reimbursement rates and increased regulations on services provided has resulted in continued low DSP wages. With New Jersey moving towards a \$15 minimum wage in mid calendar year 2020, many DSPs are finding higher wages in jobs with less responsibility such as retail and food service. Across the state, private companies have increased the price of their services and goods to accommodate for the rise in minimum wage, however, providers who employ DSPs rely on predetermined rates for services paid for by the State and Medicaid. Even before the planned increases to minimum wage, these rates undercompensated providers of direct supports and recent small-scale increases to these rates have done little to impact the bottom line for agencies that employ DSPs. 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. When adjusted for outliers, the average years spent with Project HIRE for those who left the agency during FY 19 are approximately 1 year. On the other hand, staff members who are still with Project HIRE have an average of almost 7 years with the agency, far above the industry average.

In response to this trend, the Program Director has plans to completely overhaul new worker training to improve efficiency and get new workers up to speed in the early months of hire. Using a committee made up of members from multiple levels of the agency the director plans to construct a comprehensive and easy to understand training program aimed at training individuals who are relatively new to the field of direct support. With improved onboarding and tools for new staff, the director aims to get new staff up to speed faster than years past.

Growth in Services Provided

As noted in the FY 2018 report, recent changes to the Supported Employment field have increased the variety of services that can be provided. Within the Division of Developmental Disabilities Supports Program, Project HIRE has widened the scope of services provided, specifically in the areas pertaining to pre-employment. New definitions allow for a more creative approach to looking for work for those living with I/DD. These new approaches include more robust assessments, job sampling opportunities and exploration of what individuals truly have interest in and aptitude for as far as competitive employment. In this spirit, Project HIRE has had success in providing experiences that help individuals develop and discover employment skills. One specific examples include the participation of one individual in a sampling experience at the local college to develop office related skills. This type of arrangement would not have been possible under the "Old World" DDD system and due to the individual's level of support needs, not easily financed by most local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services offices. Project HIRE will continue to pursue these types of services to expand the opportunities for those with more significant support needs.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services has also continued to refer individuals to participate in Trial Work Experience. This experience helps DVRS determine appropriateness for programs at the local offices. While the number of hours provided in FY 19 are almost identical to those provided in FY 18, it does imply the TWE services provided are of a continued high quality. High turnover has made expansion of this service difficult since a certain level of experience is required in order to bill for TWE. However, these thorough assessments continue and will continue into FY 20. Project HIRE also had hoped to increase Pre-Employment Transition Referrals in FY 19. These also have remained at similar levels to FY 18. This is due, in part, to the limited capacity caused by high turnover. It should be noted that the services provided were of high quality and participants, parents and DVRS supervisors reported positive and satisfactory outcomes. This suggests that expansion is possible using existing programming but would require the hire, and retention, of new staff members to take on additional cases.

Plans for the Next Fiscal Year

Transition Services is still a primary area in need of growth for Project HIRE. Using feedback from school districts, the Director has begun development of services tailored to the needs to specific school districts. These have been implemented in multiple school districts and have included a more specific approach to preparing students for employment through community experiences requested by families and schools, extended assessment phase and connection with adult services. It is expected after successful implementation of these services and increase in Transition hours will be seen in FY 2020.

While not technically "Transition" funded services, a vital way in which Project HIRE can expand and help more students prepare for the adult world is through Pre-Employment Transition Services funded by local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services offices. Currently, the program only provides 1 of the 5 Pre-ETS services offered by DVRS. Immediately in FY 2020, the director will create a curriculum that will expand the number of services offered to 2 of the 5 services. Once approved by DVRS it is expected that the expansion will lead to more referrals across the state.

During fiscal year 2019, 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 2018/2019 Project SEARCH cohort was a success and the program met all required benchmarks. 3 students from the graduating class are now gainfully employed with the Overlook Medical Center in career areas such as hospitality, maintenance and IT. Project HIRE was again chosen as the provider for the 2019/2020 cohort and is excited to pursue continued positive outcomes for the next graduating class.

The program director continues to promote technology as a means to achieve better outcomes, work more efficiently and help staff operate more simply. During FY 19, a new electronic monitoring system was selected, designed and successfully implemented at Project HIRE. The new system boasts better tracking tools, simplified documentation and a complete transition from paper to digital filing. The official transition occurred around the beginning of calendar year 2019 and functionality continues to grow into 2020 with multiple improvements scheduled to release throughout the year. Staff have noted the ease of access to important information regarding assigned participants and digital capture of all intake information has allowed for better monitoring of the program and improved readability of forms, documentation and an overall improvement to performance.

In FY 2020, Project HIRE will take full advantage of the program. Templates will be created that will guide staff on documentation requirements, agency forms will be digitized and allow for electronic signatures from both staff and participants, digital tools will be developed to improve services offered and caseload tracking tools will be tweaked to make monitoring of the program easier and more efficient than ever. Next, the complete Project HIRE paper file history will be transitioned to the digital system which eliminates the need for any satellite offices to house these files. Satellite offices will be closed, saving the program on rent and utility costs. Finally, the newly selected system allows for electronic billing of services provided in the DDD Supports Program which significantly reduces the number of hours spent processing these claims.

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