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Opportunities to Change the System: What You Need to Know About Transition Policies

Becoming an independent adult is a challenging journey. This phase of life is made more difficult for youth who live in poverty and who come from communities with limited opportunities. The period is particularly challenging for youth with emotional difficulties. There is a general consensus that these youth will need special services and opportunities to achieve maximum independence in adulthood and be able to contribute to society. The transition of these youth is further hindered by a complex web of federal and state policies that are well intentioned but incomplete, uncoordinated, and, in some cases, contradictory.

This presentation provided information about five of the most prominent federal policies that affect the lives of young adults who have emotional disabilities. The policies reviewed come from three service systems: education/special education, child mental health, and child welfare. The federal policies are:

- ◆ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA; P.L. 101-476) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (P.L. 105-17).
- ◆ The Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Act

(Section 119 Of the ADAMHA Reorganization Act of 1992; P.L. 102-321).

- ◆ The Independent Living Program (ILP; COBRA 1985, re-authorized COBRA, 1993).
- ◆ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 (P.L. 102-569).
- ◆ The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (1994, P.L. 103-239).

Before discussing the information within each policy that can assist parents and professionals to ensure that young adults have access to a range of opportunities, we defined the concept of transition. The definition of transition found in special education policy appears to be generally accepted and most often used in the other legislation. This definition most accurately reflects the components that are supportive of transition. Transition is defined as:

a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.

The definition includes a range of life domains that affect an individual's ability to function independently.

With this definition as the standard, we identified how each of the five policies addresses this holistic view by identifying key features that support transition. These features:

- ◆ Identify the target group.
- ◆ Require individualized planning based on the youth's strengths and needs.
- ◆ Require that the youth and family be involved in transition planning.

- ◆ Mandate that transition planning start at an early age.
- ◆ Mandate the coordination of planning, funding, and monitoring across multiple service sectors.
- ◆ Require transition planning for all young people with a disability.
- ◆ Require that transition planning cover all aspects of independent living.
- ◆ Encourage community-based learning and work experiences.

After reviewing and synthesizing our analyses of these transition policies, we found a number of discrepancies that contribute to fragmented services and confusion in the field. Special education policies most closely conform to policy features that are supportive of transition. The Children's Mental Health Act incorporates most of the components while focusing on a narrowly defined group of youth and primarily on that group's mental health service needs. The other policies specify some aspects of supportive transition and not others. This variation results in uneven and incomplete services across categorical groups of young people.

It is important to recognize that written policy, no matter how well constructed, cannot by itself change or improve services. Therefore, it is important for advocates to have an understanding of current policies across systems in order to hold professionals accountable for ensuring that each youth receives the support that matches her/his unique strengths and needs. Advocates must also be aware of the limitations of current policies in order to influence change and improvement.

Much work is still needed to ensure that the supportive features for facilitating transition are incorporated into legislation, regulations, and funding to strengthen effective practice at the community level. With continued attention to issues of accountability and effectiveness, these beginnings can lay the groundwork for providing the kinds of support that youth and young adults need.