

Summary of Findings
Transition to Independence Program (TTIP) Evaluation
Phase 1 Summary Report of Findings
July 2007

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this participatory project is to evaluate the process and outcomes of the Transition to Independence Program (TTIP) developed by Serendipity Center, a therapeutic school in SE Portland. This program is a pilot project developed to support participants aged 17-21 with mental health and developmental disabilities. This population of young people tends to have poor outcomes in terms of academic success, employment, independent living, and community integration. The goal of this pilot project based on a well-developed theoretical model, is to assist participants to successfully transition to employment and achieve their preferred and appropriate level of independent living and appropriate use of adult social services. To achieve this goal, the project model combines mental health support with employment readiness and life skills training.

In 2006 Serendipity contracted with the Research and Training Center (RTC) on Family Support and Children's Mental Health at Portland State University to provide evaluation services. The RTC is funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education, and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Since 1984 when the RTC was established it has been a leading contributor to the field of children's mental health through research and training (<http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/>). The co-principle investigators on this project have extensive experience researching this topic including the following projects:

- Voices of Youth and Families: Community Integration of Transition-Age Youth with Mental Health Disorders. A study conducted by Pauline Jivanjee, Ph.D. and Jean M. Kruzich, Ph.D.
- Clark County Youth Transition Project/Options Evaluation conducted by Nancy Korloff, Ph.D.

The evaluation team, including RTC, TTIP, and Serendipity Center staff, developed a two phased approach to the evaluation. During the first phase, conducted between May and August 2007, the evaluation team interviewed staff about the program goals, activities and expected outcomes for participants, and reviewed student case files to collect descriptive baseline data. This phase of the evaluation is focused on collecting information to describe the program and to plan and develop appropriate evaluation methods and measurements to be used in the second phase of the evaluation. This report summarizes the findings from the first phase of the evaluation.

EVALUATION DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Phase 1:

During this phase of the evaluation the purpose was to collect data that described the program and participants. Data were collected through staff interviews and reviewing program participants' files. Seven TTIP staff members were interviewed in June, 2007. The interviews were guided by two sets of questions (see Appendix A). The first set of questions was focused on overall program implementation and the second set of questions asked about individual participants in TTIP. Individual participant questions were only asked with those staff working directly with the young people. The interviews were conducted by the same researcher, were audio taped, lasted between one to two hours, and informed consents were signed prior to the interview. Staff interviewed included the two teachers, two clinical case managers, the clinical director, program director, and the executive director. The staff interviewed have worked at Serendipity for 1 to 27 years with an average of 14.5 years.

For this phase data were also collected from case files of active participants in TTIP. Of the five active TTIP participants, all provided informed consent to have their files reviewed. Data collected from the files included information about mental health and developmental disability history, academic skills, vocational skills, relationship skills, current living status, goals, and other system involvement. Participants whose files were reviewed ranged in age from 19 to 21; two lived with their biological mother and three lived in foster care or a group home.

KEY FINDINGS

The following report summarizes key themes identified in the data from staff interviews and file reviews. The evaluation team has organized the themes into two major groups: strengths of TTIP and challenges. Included in the appendix is a summary of findings for each question asked in the interviews (see Appendix B).

STRENGTHS

- **Staff believe TTIP is a needed program.** All seven staff members interviewed believe that TTIP is a needed program because there are no other educational/school based programs available to address independent living skills and mental health simultaneously. Staff reported that prior to TTIP young persons leaving Serendipity were often referred to existing job training programs but were unsuccessful. Staff reported that young people were often unsuccessful because existing programs are not equipped to address their mental illness and/or developmental disability and this population needs more time between high school and independence to learn daily living skills.
- **TTIP philosophy in treating young people as emerging adults.** Staff reported that the way participants are treated is a primary reason the program is and will be successful. Three principles of TTIP that were discussed in the interviews include:

- Treating participants as emerging adults,
- Individualized planning, and
- Involving participants in goal setting and curriculum planning.

Unlike the behavioral management strategies and supervision policies at Serendipity, TTIP participants are responsible for making decisions about attending TTIP activities and may leave the campus and walk around campus unescorted. Consequences as a result of decisions the participant made or a result of behavior are likely to be mediated versus punished by suspension. Staff reported that the TTIP teachers do an impressive job of talking through conflicts with participants and relating the event to what might have happened if the conflict occurred on a job site. It was reported that TTIP believes in individualized planning based on the participant's needs, skills, and desires. TTIP staff work closely with participants to identify their strengths and interests and attempt to find resources so the participant can explore these options. In multiple interviews, staff stated that the participants in TTIP had risen to the occasion of having more independence and freedom.

- **TTIP provides a flexible curriculum.** A strength of TTIP is that it provides individualized curriculum based on a participant's strengths and needs. For example at one time during the day one participant could be exploring rental options, another practicing job interviewing skills, and another working on a math worksheet. Young people do participate together in a morning group in which they practice social skills and check in on daily issues.
- **TTIP teachers are respected by other TTIP staff.** Interviewees identified TTIP staff as a significant strength of the program. Interviewees were grateful for the classroom teachers and reported that the positive and respectful relationships between the teachers and the participants are a critical component of TTIP.
- **TTIP involves families and young people in planning.** At Serendipity's therapeutic school, families typically communicate through the clinical case manager. In TTIP, families and caregivers of participants can communicate through the clinical case manager but can also access the program and teachers throughout the day by emailing or calling directly to the classroom. TTIP participants and caregivers of youth 16 years of older who were enrolled at Serendipity prior to joining TTIP are invited to participate in goal setting for the youth beyond the standard IEP process. These caregivers are invited to complete the Parent/Guardian Worksheet for Transition Plan Development which asks caregivers about the young person's experience and what skills or resources the caregiver thinks the young person needs, such as using public transportation and medical insurance. The young person is also interviewed and the Youth Worksheet for the Serendipity Transition Plan is completed.

CHALLENGES

- **Coordinating and transitioning from an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP).** Making sure that current goals for a participant are consistent with what is being done in the classroom was noted as a challenge during interviews and the file reviews. Participants often enter TTIP with an IEP that is not due for annual review and therefore the goals are carried over to TTIP, but may not accurately reflect what TTIP is working on with the young person. It is also unclear if all relevant staff are included in IEP planning and transition planning.
- **Marketing and increasing referrals.** TTIP services are paid for by the referring school district and therefore it is important to know that TTIP was developed because school districts requested such a program. Just before TTIP was to open budgets cuts limited school districts ability to refer participants. This was an unforeseen limitation for TTIP and TTIP administrators are currently working to address this challenge.
- **Implementing TTIP on the same campus as Serendipity.** Interviewees noted that the different approaches to behavior management and supervision created some challenges when TTIP began. Many of the TTIP participants had been students at Serendipity and the Serendipity staff initially questioned the benefits of the TTIP approach.
- **There was limited time at the beginning of TTIP to prepare curriculum.** Staff had little time to prepare curriculum prior to TTIP being implemented. Teachers reported that they will use the past year's experiences to inform curriculum decisions. TTIP teachers also reported that over the summer they plan to refine their curriculum for the next school year.
- **It is difficult to prepare curriculum for participants with a variety of needs.** TTIP was originally developed for students who had achieved a modified diploma. This meant that students would be focusing solely on independent living skills. However TTIP has served several students without modified diplomas meaning they need to also continue to work on academic goals and receive credit for their time. A strength of TTIP is in providing individualized plans; however the plans were intended only to deal with independent living skills. Currently some students need to incorporate academic goals in their IEP and the TTIP staff have to monitor their grades and credits differently than for participants with modified diplomas.
- **Young people need resources in addition to TTIP.** Many interviewees reported that TTIP participants currently need or will need resources beyond what TTIP provides. Integrating young people into the community can not happen in a classroom but instead requires experience in the community. To successfully transition through community experiences, interviewees reported that youth need job coaches and mentors that understand mental illness and developmental

disabilities. Currently TTIP staff attempt to provide this support as they can but are not in a position to be a mentoring program or a job coaching program. Interviewees also stated that because this population has difficulty accessing the traditional adult service system they need developmentally appropriate mental health and/or developmental disabilities services.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the findings about strengths and challenges presented above, the following considerations and recommendations are suggested.

IEP and ITP Goals: To address the challenge of coordinating the IEP and ITP process and making sure the goals are consistent with activities in the classroom, it is recommended that TTIP and other relevant staff take time to discuss the process of developing transition goals and incorporating the IEP protocols and other goal setting tools used by Serendipity and TTIP (transition plan worksheets). The result of these conversations would be a plan for developing or updating transition goals and other goals included on an existing IEP for all new TTIP enrollees (those referred internally and externally from Serendipity).

Continue to review and refine curriculum. To address several of the challenges mentioned above it is recommended that teachers continue to modify the curriculum using evidence-based strategies. This may result in implementing a curriculum (like the LCCE) that is appropriate for this population or it may mean putting together segments of different curricula. It is recommended that curricula used be based on evidence of their effectiveness. By tightening the curriculum, TTIP will improve consistency, have definable outcomes, be in a better place to demonstrate effectiveness, and better serve young people with mental health and developmental disabilities. These achievements will assist TTIP in clearly and confidently articulating its program theory and expectations which will improve marketing and relationships with Serendipity staff.

Intake procedures. To address the challenge of IEP/ITP planning and the planning for young people with a variety of needs, it is recommended that TTIP staff revisit the intake process. This includes reviewing the eligibility requirements, what is collected during the intake process, and who takes part in the intake process. By having information needed at program entry about a participant's needs and skills, TTIP staff, clinical case managers and teachers, will be better informed to create appropriate goals and prepare appropriate curriculum. This process will involve deciding if further assessments of skills are needed, when transition goals are developed, and who is involved in the intake process.

Partnering with other programs. To address the challenge that TTIP participants need resources in addition to TTIP, it is recommended that TTIP staff continue to build partnerships with other community programs. During interviews staff reported that this is a desired focus but it involves a significant amount of time. Supporting staff to explore and nurture partnerships is important since the resources of TTIP are limited and

attempting to provide a wide variety of needed supports may dilute the effective delivery of its primary service.

EVALUATION CONSIDERATIONS

A primary goal of this phase of the evaluation was to collect information that would inform the development of evaluation methods and measurements to be used in the second phase of the evaluation. In order to plan for phase 2 of the evaluation, the following items need to be considered.

- 1. Baseline for non-Serendipity participants.** It is important to consider how data elements will be collected consistently across Serendipity populations and participants referred from outside of Serendipity. For example if an assessment instrument or goal planning tool is used with young people from Serendipity who are transferring to TTIP, the same will need to be administered with non-Serendipity referrals. This may mean developing an intake packet that is completed on all TTIP enrollees regardless of who referred them.
- 2. Tracking goals.** If the evaluation is going to track progress toward individualized goals, it is important that there be clear measurable goals that are relevant to what TTIP provides.
- 3. TTIP's expectation of impact.** It will be important that staff TTIP continue to examine their expectations of the impact of TTIP on transition outcomes for these young people. The definition of a successful transition may be that a person has met their goals related to independent living, vocation, relationships, and accessing the adult system as needed. TTIP staff need to carefully assess the amount of impact that participation in TTIP can be expected to have. The response to this question will determine if the evaluation measures long term outcomes (e.g. has met independent living goals 1 year post TTIP) or short term outcomes (e.g. has applied for 3 jobs in 3 months post TTIP).
- 4. Standardized measures and curriculum.** It is important to decide if TTIP will implement any new measures or curriculum prior to the start of the school year. When making these decisions, it will be important to think about how staff will administer and collect data and how useful the data will be.
- 5. How to describe the intervention.** It is important to be able to clearly articulate what staff do and why they think it works. This is helpful when marketing the program, soliciting funding, and evaluating program outcomes. The evaluation team will need to be able to accurately describe the TTIP program. This is more easily accomplished if there is a standard curriculum or at least pieces of standard curricula, although this is not mandatory.