

Stronger Together: How Interagency Collaboration Transforms Youth Transitions

POLICY BRIEF

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Executive Summary

Interagency collaboration is crucial for enhancing transition outcomes for youth with disabilities (YWD) as they move from education to employment. Despite federal mandates like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), many states have struggled with fragmented services and a lack of coordination among agencies, leading to inconsistent support for YWD. This fragmentation often results in delays, duplicated efforts, and missed opportunities for better employment and postsecondary outcomes.

Many states have begun to implement strategies to improve interagency collaboration, demonstrating the benefits of structured coordination in enhancing transition services. For example, Maine has taken steps to align vocational rehabilitation, education, and workforce systems through initiatives like the Children's Cabinet and the Legislative Document (LD) 924 Task Force. The Pathways to Partnerships (P2P) initiative in Maine offers a model for integrating vocational rehabilitation, education, and independent living services to establish a more structured framework for transition-aged youth. Lessons from such efforts suggest that Vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies must proactively foster collaboration among education, workforce development, and independent living organizations to ensure YWD receive the necessary support to access competitive integrated employment (CIE) and postsecondary education.

This policy brief explores the historical challenges of interagency coordination, highlights promising practices, and provides policy recommendations for VR agencies to strengthen partnerships across service systems. By prioritizing collaboration, states can create sustainable and effective pathways that improve long-term economic and social inclusion for YWD.

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Background: The Need for Collaboration in VR Services

Youth with disabilities often experience substantial barriers to employment, including limited early vocational exposure, insufficient career planning, and inadequate coordination between agencies. Research consistently shows that YWD who receive transition support from multiple agencies—including education, VR, workforce development, and community-based services—are significantly more likely to be employed or enrolled in postsecondary education after high school. Despite federal mandates like the IDEA and WIOA, many states struggle to coordinate services effectively. The result is that many youth "fall off a cliff" after high school, losing access to essential supports just as they begin their transition into adulthood.

Historically, interagency collaboration in the United States has faced systemic challenges. Curda (2018) found that nearly half of VR agencies cited lack of cross-agency coordination as a major barrier to effective service delivery. The same report highlighted that fewer than 30% of state education agencies had formal agreements with VR services to support school-to-work transitions. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2), youth with disabilities who had exposure to multiple coordinated services were twice as likely to be employed within two years of leaving high school compared to those who did not receive such services.

Inconsistencies in funding streams and conflicting agency priorities have further complicated interagency collaboration. While policies encourage coordination, misalignment between VR and WIOA youth programs continues to present challenges. Differences in agency missions, administrative complexities, and varying eligibility requirements create barriers that make it difficult to align employment programs for youth with disabilities (Honeycutt et al., 2018). These bureaucratic barriers have limited the ability of agencies to provide seamless transition supports, leading to increased reliance on fragmented and ad hoc solutions rather than sustainable partnerships.

The lack of standardized data-sharing mechanisms has also hindered collaboration. A 2020 study from the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth (CAPE-Youth) found that only 18 states had fully integrated data systems that track youth employment and transition outcomes across agencies (Saleh et al., 2024). This data gap prevents agencies from effectively monitoring progress and making evidence-based policy decisions.

Challenges in Interagency Collaboration

A major challenge in interagency collaboration is that systems operate in silos and do not effectively communicate with each other. Each agency functions independently, with its own eligibility criteria, service structures, and operational frameworks, creating barriers to coordination. The lack of interoperability among systems prevents seamless information sharing, making it difficult for agencies to work together efficiently. As a result, youth with disabilities often find themselves navigating complex bureaucracies without clear guidance or cohesive support.

Another pressing issue is competing priorities and funding restrictions. VR, education, and workforce agencies often operate under different mandates and budgetary

constraints, leading to service fragmentation. Conflicting regulations and misaligned funding streams create inefficiencies, where youth may receive overlapping services in some areas while experiencing service gaps in others. Without dedicated funding mechanisms that support cross-agency initiatives, collaboration remains inconsistent and unsustainable.

Data-sharing limitations further exacerbate service fragmentation. Many agencies lack the infrastructure or policy frameworks necessary to exchange information securely and efficiently. Incompatible data systems prevent tracking of service utilization, progress, and outcomes, limiting the ability of agencies to make informed decisions and adjust interventions as needed. Without improved data coordination, agencies struggle to provide continuous and comprehensive support to YWD.

Limited cross-agency training for professionals remains another barrier to collaboration. Many VR counselors, educators, and workforce specialists do not receive adequate training on how other systems operate, leading to gaps in service provision. Without shared training programs, professionals may fail to leverage available resources or fully understand the scope of services that partner agencies can offer.

Inconsistent engagement with families and employers further complicates the transition process for YWD. Families play a crucial role in supporting their children's transition to adulthood, yet outreach efforts to involve them in interagency planning are often fragmented. Similarly, employers—key stakeholders in fostering inclusive workplaces—frequently lack the necessary guidance and incentives to recruit and retain youth with disabilities. A lack of coordinated employer engagement strategies results in fewer employment opportunities and limited pathways to competitive integrated employment.

Finally, navigating benefits counseling remains a challenge for many individuals with disabilities. Many YWD are hesitant to pursue employment due to concerns about how it may impact their eligibility for Social Security benefits, Medicaid, and other supports. Inconsistent and unclear guidance from agencies leaves individuals without the information needed to make informed decisions, leading to hesitancy in pursuing work opportunities.

Maine as a Case Study: Maine provides a compelling example of how interagency collaboration can improve outcomes for youth with disabilities. The state has historically recognized the need for better transition services and has taken steps to enhance coordination across agencies. The Plan for Maine Youth (2000) was one of the earliest initiatives that emphasized the need for smooth transitions between child and adult service systems, laying the groundwork for later reforms. In 2013, Maine passed the Employment First Law, a joint effort between the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education to prioritize competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. This policy shift reinforced the need for interagency cooperation and alignment of services to ensure meaningful employment opportunities.

In 2019, the Maine Children's Cabinet was re-established to enhance interdepartmental coordination on youth policies, ensuring that multiple agencies, including education, workforce development, and rehabilitation services, work together toward common transition goals. Furthering these efforts, the Legislative Document (LD) 924 Task Force (2021-2022) conducted an in-depth analysis of transition service gaps, identifying critical deficiencies in service coordination and proposing solutions such as the creation of a transition specialist role and a centralized interagency information hub. These policy recommendations highlight Maine's recognition of systemic barriers and its commitment to developing structured collaboration to address them.

Maine has also piloted innovative programs that emphasize interagency coordination. The Work-Based Learning Pilot (2016) demonstrated that students in regions with stronger agency collaboration, such as Bangor, experienced better employment outcomes compared to those in areas with weaker coordination, such as Augusta (Siwach et al., 2022). The results suggest that targeted interagency partnerships can directly impact employment success for transition-aged youth.

In 2020, Maine became one of the first states to eliminate subminimum wage for workers with disabilities, reinforcing its commitment to improving employment outcomes through coordinated policy efforts. This legislative change required agencies to work together to transition individuals from sheltered workshops to competitive integrated employment, further demonstrating the importance of cross-agency collaboration in ensuring sustainable employment pathways.

Building on these efforts, Maine launched the Pathways to Partnerships (P2P) initiative in 2023, a model designed to enhance cross-agency collaboration between vocational rehabilitation, education, and independent living services. P2P seeks to establish structured frameworks that ensure young people receive the necessary support as they transition into the workforce. By strengthening communication between agencies and implementing data-sharing mechanisms, P2P has the potential to address longstanding service fragmentation. If successful, this model could serve as a blueprint for other states aiming to streamline transition services and improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Key Data Points Supporting Policy Change

Several national and state-level trends underscore the urgency of improving interagency collaboration. Nationally, only 36% of YWD aged 14-24 are employed, compared to 46% of youth without disabilities, highlighting a significant employment gap (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Data from the Census Bureau (2021, 2019, 2012) indicates that 57% of workers with disabilities report losing a job due to their disability, with many citing lack of job counseling, limited accommodations, and insufficient government assistance as key barriers. Postsecondary attainment remains a challenge, with fewer than 18% of YWD completing a bachelor's degree compared to 32% of their non-disabled peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). These statistics suggest a critical need for stronger postsecondary transition support and integrated service models.

Data from Maine underscores the importance of a coordinated approach in vocational rehabilitation services. In 2022, only 32% of YWD aged 14-24 in Maine were employed, compared to 53% of their peers without disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Stronger agency collaboration has been linked to higher employment rates among transition-aged youth, reinforcing the necessity of structured partnerships. Employment barriers remain a significant challenge, with 56% of workers with disabilities in Maine reporting job loss due to their disability, a figure nearly identical to the 57% national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, 2019, 2012). Moreover, Maine respondents demonstrated a higher need for government assistance (40% compared to 33% nationally) and job counseling (13% compared to 9% nationally) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, 2019, 2012), suggesting that enhanced collaboration among service agencies could provide better employment preparation and retention support.

Education and training outcomes also highlight the importance of coordinated efforts. Maine YWD outperformed national averages in reading and mathematics proficiency, with 22% reaching proficiency compared to 14% nationally (NAEP, 2022). However, a significant gap persists in postsecondary attainment, with only 25% of YWD earning a bachelor's degree compared to 33% of their non-disabled peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). These figures suggest that while early educational interventions may be relatively successful, transition support to higher education and career pathways remains insufficient.

The extent of program utilization further underscores the role of interagency collaboration. Approximately 10% of YWD in Maine accessed VR services, compared to only 5% nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, 2019, 2012). This suggests that states with stronger interagency partnerships may be more effective in reaching eligible youth and ensuring that they receive needed services.

Policy Recommendations for VR Agencies

Maine's ongoing efforts highlight the steps necessary for achieving effective interagency collaboration, offering valuable insights for other states working to strengthen their own coordination models. Formalized agreements between agencies are essential to ensuring accountability and governance. In Maine, interagency agreements have laid a foundation for collaboration, but ongoing refinement is needed to clarify roles and sustain long-term cooperation. States should develop legally binding memoranda of

understanding (MOUs) that clearly outline agency responsibilities and expectations. Establishing a centralized oversight body, similar to Maine's task forces, can further help states monitor coordination efforts, resolve disputes, and implement best practices consistently.

Strengthening workforce development initiatives is necessary for improving employment outcomes for YWD. Maine's Work-Based Learning Pilot demonstrated that interagency coordination plays a key role in increasing employment rates, but disparities still exist across regions. Expanding work-based learning opportunities, particularly in rural areas, can help address these gaps. States should collaborate with businesses to create sustainable career pathways, encourage inclusive hiring practices, and provide employer training on disability inclusion.

To enhance service delivery, VR agencies should prioritize investment in robust data-sharing infrastructure. Maine's LD 924 Task Force has recommended the development of a centralized interagency information hub to improve information exchange. While implementation is still in progress, similar systems could be adopted in other states to streamline service coordination and provide real-time tracking of YWD progress.

Funding alignment is critical to sustaining interagency collaboration. Maine's Children's Cabinet has attempted to leverage multi-agency funding to improve service coordination, though challenges remain in fully integrating funding streams. Other states should explore braided funding models that combine VR, education, and workforce resources to enhance service continuity. Establishing dedicated funding sources for interagency initiatives will ensure long-term stability and prevent service gaps caused by fragmented budgets.

Training and professional development must be expanded to support cross-agency collaboration. Maine has initiated interagency training efforts, but continued investment is necessary to equip professionals with the knowledge and skills needed for effective coordination. States should implement standardized training programs for VR counselors, educators, and workforce professionals, ensuring they understand each agency's role and the full range of services available to YWD.

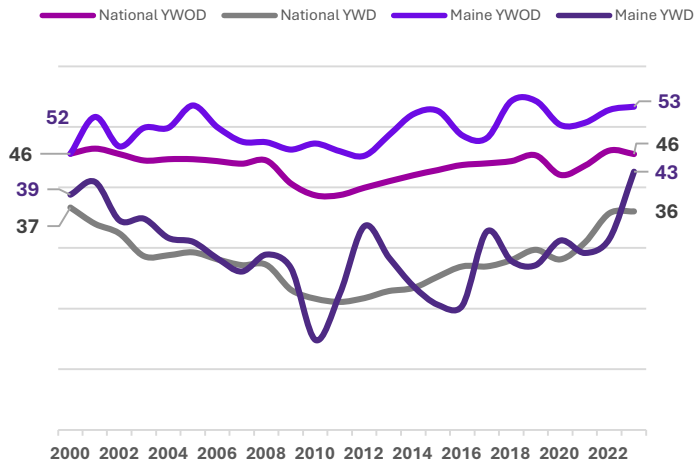
Outreach and engagement with families and underserved communities must also be strengthened. While Maine has taken steps to improve family engagement through interagency initiatives, gaps remain in reaching historically underserved populations. VR agencies should develop targeted outreach strategies, expand mobile and virtual service options, and ensure that families receive individualized transition planning support, including benefits counseling.

A standardized national framework for benefits counseling should be developed to address concerns about employment and financial stability. Maine has worked to integrate benefits counseling into transition planning, but continued improvements are needed to ensure that all YWD receive clear, consistent guidance. Other states should collaborate with the Social Security Administration to streamline benefits counseling and improve accessibility to financial planning resources for YWD and their families.

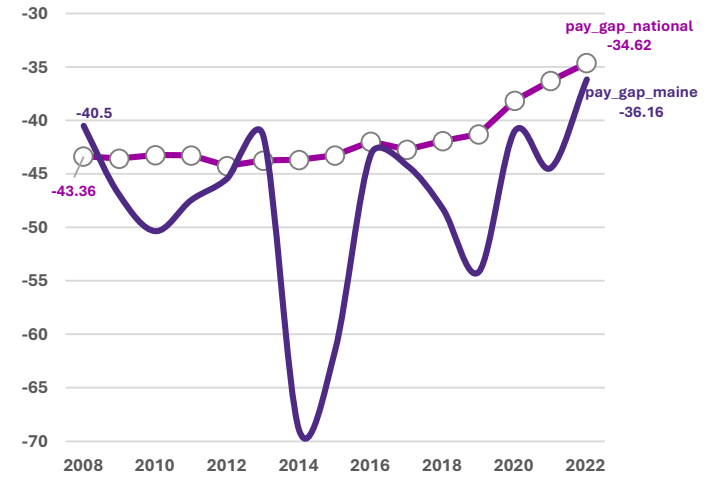
By incorporating these strategies, VR agencies can build on Maine's ongoing efforts to improve interagency collaboration, ensuring that YWD across the country receive the comprehensive, coordinated support necessary to achieve economic independence and meaningful employment.

Tables and Figures

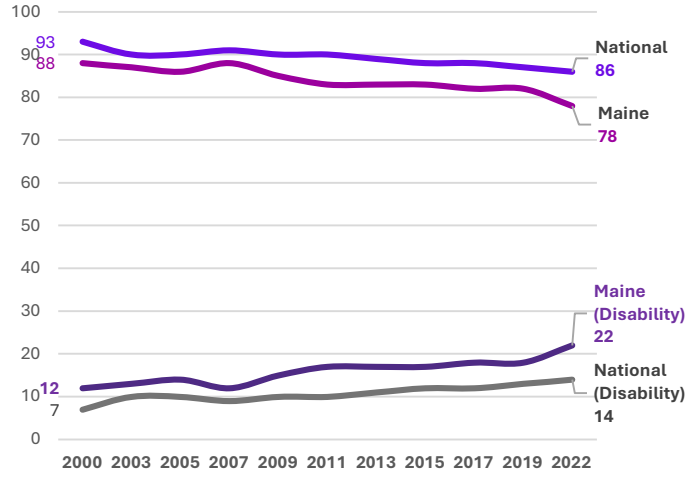
Employment rate of youth aged 14 to 25 by disability status in Maine and nationally



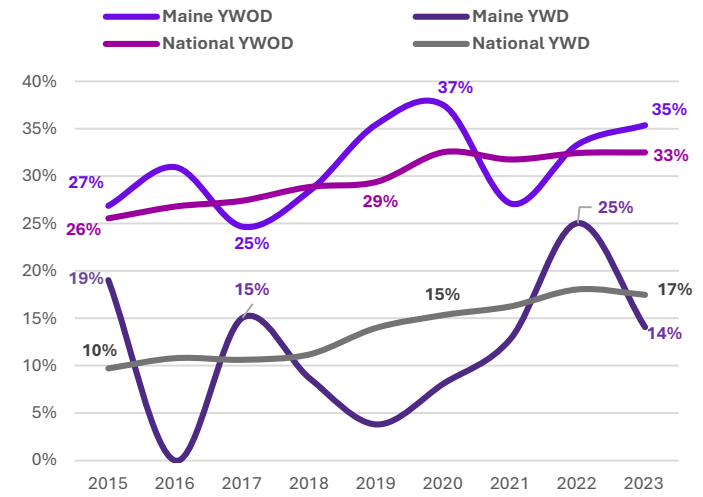
Disability earnings gap for working age population in Maine and the nation



Percent of students with disability aged 10-13 above National Assessment Education Progress (NAEP) proficiency in mathematics

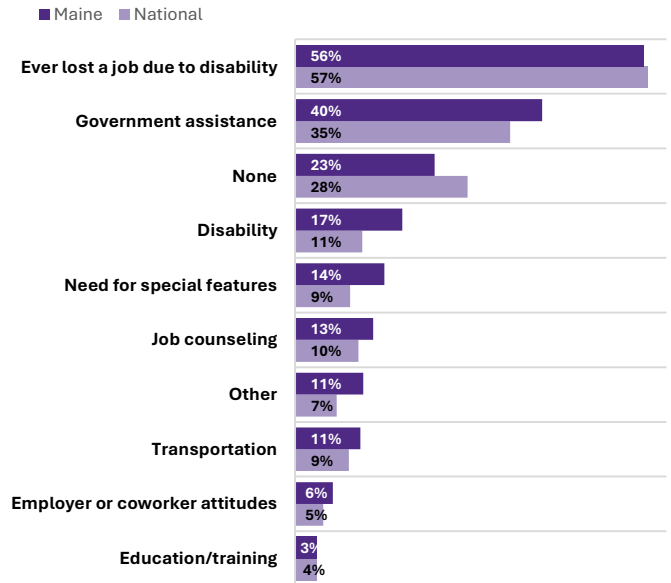


Percentage of youth (14-24) who completed a bachelor's degree



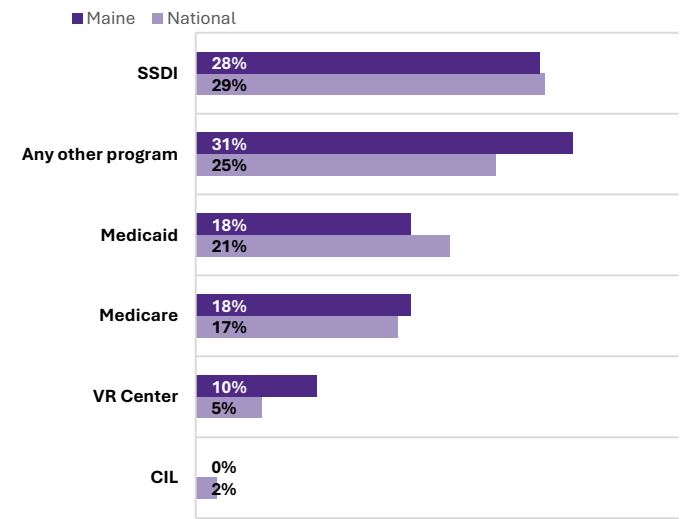
Barriers to employment among working-age (14-65) people with disabilities

% of the population (Ages 14-65)



VR service utilization among YWD in Maine vs. nationally

% of the population (Ages 14-65)



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