



Alabama Department of Mental Health/Division of Developmental Disabilities
(DMH/DD)

**Findings and Observations Report
State Employment Leadership Network (SELN)**

Site Visit Dates: Sept. 30th – Oct. 2nd, 2013

Report (first draft): January 2014

DMH/DD comments: January 2015

Report (final): February 2015

SELN Member State Agency: Alabama Department of Mental Health/Division of Developmental Disabilities (DMH/DD)

Process for Development of Findings and Observations Report

We reviewed:

- DMH/DD's SELN State Strategic Employment Full Assessment
- State policy documents and resource materials
- Participant feedback collected during the SELN Focus Groups with Individuals with Disabilities and Families, the Alabama core internal leadership team, Case managers, DD subcommittee, Supported Employment workgroup and Vocational Rehabilitation Staff.
- Data sources from the following surveys:
 - SELN Supplement survey (stakeholder) responses: **104 completed surveys**
 - SELN Individual and Family survey responses: **543 completed surveys**

SELN Project Team

Site Visit and Report:

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Introduction

The SELN is a membership-based network of state developmental disability (DD) agencies committed to making changes in their service systems. The SELN is an active and engaged community of practice where members meet to connect, collaborate, and share information and lessons learned across state lines and system boundaries. Participating state agency officials build cross-community support for pressing employment-related issues and policies at state and federal levels. States commit to work together and engage in a series of activities to analyze key elements in their systems to improve the integrated employment outcomes for their citizens with developmental disabilities. Technical assistance to each member state is customized to the unique needs of each state based on the current system of supports and goals for improvement. Member states are guided through a detailed process to both assist the SELN project team with learning about the state system and to begin organizing the state agency's own planning for system improvements.

Upon joining the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN), the Alabama Department of Mental Health /Division of Developmental Disabilities (DMH/DD), as a new member state agency, completed the SELN State Strategic Employment Assessment in September, 2013. This tool provides a an opportunity to describe and analyze the state's infrastructure and support for achieving integrated employment outcomes among persons with developmental disabilities receiving publicly-financed support.

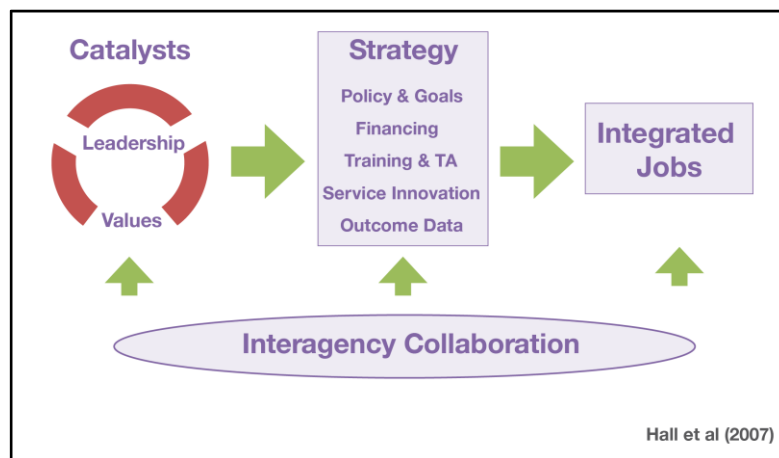
DMH/DD also invited stakeholders, partners and customers to participate in and complete both in-person discussions and online surveys to gather input on current perceptions and experiences from a wide range of perspectives.

Using DMH/DD's State Strategic Employment Assessment response as a guide, the SELN Project Team conducted an on-site visit in Alabama, September 30th through October 2nd, 2013. Meetings were conducted with key state agency officials as identified by DMH/DD, and included agency directors, case managers, self-advocates, families, providers, and other partners in the effort to improve individual integrated employment outcomes.

Participants in the stakeholder focus group discussions contributed to the goal of developing a better understanding of the context for integrated employment in Alabama. All of the surveys noted above as well as feedback from various stakeholder focus groups have all been reviewed for key insights. Information gathered through the process is summarized in this Findings and Observations report prepared by SELN staff.

Organizing the Report

This report identifies the seven key elements essential to improving and achieving employment success. The graphic below is used throughout SELN marketing materials to depict the High-Performing Framework and elements:



The report summarizes the results of the assessment process as “Key Findings” and suggests opportunities for improvement in “Potential Focus Areas.” The state agency and other partners may use the report as the basis for the development of a work plan detailing the outcomes, activities to achieve set goals, and strategies to pursue in the months and years ahead to improve individual, integrated employment outcomes for Alabama citizens with disabilities.

The SELN staff will conduct follow-up meetings with DMH/DD to identify priority outcomes to address through SELN membership and develop effective implementation strategies on the State’s selected areas of focus.

Because this review represents an unprecedented solicitation of input, it is critical for state leadership to respond through action and implementation of a work plan that includes measurable system improvements over time, communicated regularly to the field, and with consistent stakeholder involvement and feedback.

I. Leadership

A. Key Findings.

- Alabama’s Department of Mental Health /Division of Developmental Disabilities (DMH/DD) has provided evidence of a strong commitment to employment for individuals with DD/IDD. A vision of improving the role of integrated employment outcomes in the state has been communicated over the past 12+ months by leadership staff and has included seeking input from stakeholders in an effort to establish a realistic implementation/work plan.
- DMH/DD and stakeholders throughout the state, including family members, recognize the significant cultural shift represented by a focus on improving integrated employment outcomes in Alabama. Like so many other states, Alabama has a long history of utilizing facility-based, segregated day service options, which makes a shift to more integrated options quite challenging in terms of staffing, funding and oversight.
 - Earlier deinstitutionalization efforts were focused on movement out of state run, segregated residential settings,
 - Less attention was paid to what an individual was supported to do during the day, and
 - The typical “per diem package” which bundles residential and day services, is often viewed as more convenient to arrange and support over time, and paid staff as well as individuals and families, experience challenges moving beyond that model.
- To assist in prioritizing work in this area and to address obstacles and learn from other states’ efforts in the employment arena, DMH/DD: 1.) joined the SELN, 2.) continued and prioritized the Employment Workgroup of its established DD Subcommittee advisory body, 3.) joined the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy’s (ODEP) Employment First (E1st) State Leadership Mentoring Program, and, established and leads an interagency Employment First Team for state agency collaboration.
- In the spring of 2013 DMH/DD disseminated correspondence from the Associate Commissioner reminding stakeholders that a previous memo sent out in January, 2012 by the previous Associate Commissioner, following clarification in CMS policy in its Bulletin

to states in September 2011, was still in effect; stating that federal financial participation (FFP or federal payment) for segregated (by disability) sheltered work was not authorized and that as of October 1, 2015 it would be discontinued in Alabama's ID and Living at Home Waiver services. In the more recent memo, providers were encouraged to shift their systems to supporting individuals into integrated, competitive or customized employment (paying at or above minimum wage) and to begin transitioning individuals into real, time limited (up to no more than two years), prevocational services to help individuals develop skills for integrated employment.

- DMH/DD has also partnered with the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs and other agencies and was awarded a US DOL Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) grant to place disability Resource Coordinators (DRCs) with American Job Center offices in one region of the state. The DRCs will focus on improving employment outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities, primarily, but not exclusively between ages 19-24, who are often unserved or underserved in the Alabama Career Center System.
- DMH/DD is commended for its strong relationship with sister agencies in Alabama for the collective focus on employment as the priority outcome for individuals with DD/IDD.
 - During the site visit, staff from the VR system affirmed a readiness to identify needed systems changes in support of individuals who could both benefit from VR services and utilize long-term DMH/DD funded supports to be successful on the job.
 - Capacity building and competency-development were reinforced as top priorities.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- To support the steps DMH/DD has already taken it is time to:
 - Analyze, align and strengthen the policies and practices impacting integrated employment services and expectations across the state. This includes but is not limited to the possible benefits of a statewide “employment first” policy (for laying out expectations and requirements), a robust process of

person-focused career planning, and the organizational transformation and competency-development of the paid provider support system. Examples of each are available through SELN membership and can be discussed with DMH/DD staff through work plan priorities.

- Develop a clear, consistent communication strategy including:
 - Ad campaigns that highlight success stories,
 - Data that not only shows progress towards employment outcomes, but highlights those providers that are exceeding in innovative practices,
 - Literature and resource materials that are easily read and understandable on the role of paid integrated employment for specific audiences (e.g., families, paid support providers, etc.).
- Develop and maintain an active strategic planning process. DMH/DD has developed allies and partners through its leadership efforts and committees. These efforts should be supported by a detailed plan reflecting the short- and longer-term objectives for the system over the next 5-10 years. Such a plan can include how to address alternatives to current service options, increasing demand for individual, integrated employment, and the methods, policies and procedures to be implemented in Alabama.
- Review the current roles and responsibilities of all key team players, and in particular, that of case managers throughout the state. This should include possible conflict of interest issues for those who work for an agency that provides other services. Unbundling these functions will strengthen the case managers role related to locating, coordinating and monitoring services through a collaborative person centered planning process.
- Assist the entire service system, including individuals and families, and other funding partners, to understand and appreciate the connection between the values espoused in policies and practice, such as a meaningful life, and the types of choices offered to enhance individuals quality of life and financial stability. For example, placing an emphasis on the role of paid, community-based employment in state IDD systems is not to the exclusion of “choice”. The entire high-performing framework identified throughout this report and through the SELN process, supports a

state's efforts to build a robust system of options for individuals so the choices are clear, the funding needed to support preferred options is available, and competent, confident staff are available for support.

II. Strategic Goals and Operating Policies.

A. Key Findings.

- DMH/DD drafted and introduced a House bill to establish the employment first initiative Act that did not pass. The bill would require state programs and services to promote competitive employment of individuals with disabilities in an integrated setting.
 - In many states this is what is often referred to as an “employment first policy” and while not required to assure outcomes are achieved in the state, it is often a very useful step toward aligning interests and reinforcing expectations.
 - Alabama is lacking a strong employment policy or statement communicating the expectation for individual, integrated employment outcomes.
 - DMH/DD leadership has expressed an interest in continuing to approach opportunities for similar legislation in the future.

- Comments received from the stakeholder surveys revealed that although there is a strong commitment by DMH/DD to move forward with individualized integrated employment, there was strong concern about how the Division will move toward implementation of changes needed to meet their commitment to increase integrated employment outcomes. Stakeholders recognize the need for a structured work plan to demonstrate the commitment to community employment as a top priority through focused action steps. The following survey responses reflect the nature of stakeholder feedback:
 - *“DMH/DD has laid out a high quality vision for truly integrated employment of persons with ID/DD, but the methods for reaching that goal have not been identified”.*
 - *“DMH/DD has created a meaningful initiative, but there is a lack of policy or practice at the community/provider level”.*
 - *“DMH/DD is committed to employment, but there is no plan for the DD agency to implement”.*

- During the site visit there was positive feedback on the willingness across partners such as the IDD and vocational rehabilitation (VR) systems to collaborate. While the willingness to collaborate is

critical, actions need to be taken to align what is now a disconnect between policy, collaboration in the field and training that is impacting the Division's ability to advance real systems change.

- Despite recent emphases on integrated employment or alternatives to more restrictive or less integrated environments, self-advocates and family members reinforced that the current system is not supportive of the options they may be seeking.
 - There was also agreement that individuals often exit high school and lose ground including skills and interests due to limited community-based or integrated options. This leads to the frustrations often expressed during planning meetings, community forums and through reviews such as the SELN process. Self-advocates and family members expressed that the lack of clarity in the information they receive, and the inconsistent follow-through by case managers and paid provider staff, do not support the Division's integrated employment goals. For example, some of the parents in our focus groups had these things to say:

“It’s not about getting something for free; we want our children to be gainfully employed to the best of their ability”.

“We don’t even know what supported employment is”.

“There is a variation in case management, no statewide consistency”.

“Some of our children are declining after they graduate high school as there is nothing to do”.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- Revisit the previous employment first bill to ensure it reflects language consistent with the Division's work and collaboration with other systems. A cross-system bill with ample state-wide support may gain the most traction and will illustrate the willingness for a wide variety of needed partners to make change in Alabama.

- Evaluate the best course for releasing public statements related to stronger integrated employment outcomes (e.g., defunding sheltered workshops), including the level of detail needed to outline how such changes will occur and what analyses and activities led the Division to such decisions. Defining and sharing these aspects of systems change will address the apprehensions by those impacted by new and different options. This will assist DMH/DD in addressing confusion and anxieties which arise, and will offer those impacted, an opportunity to evaluate current business practices. The message is better expressed that the system is building capacity to meet the increasing demand for services that lead to integrated employment outcomes and an inclusive life for individuals with developmental disabilities.
- Develop the needed memorandums of agreement (MOA) across state systems to identify distinct responsibilities and accountabilities, with the possibility of additional MOA's at other levels as needed (e.g., local or regional agreements). Examples of the specific responsibilities to address include:
 - Data-sharing across systems to measure progress toward the employment outcomes and the effectiveness of the agreement(s),
 - Shared responsibilities for person-focused career planning processes and team involvement,
 - Training and professional development to build capacity and ensure a competent workforce is available to provide paid supports.
- Develop a training strategy to enhance case managers' competency in discussing employment as a valued outcome with individuals who have only known segregated services.

III. Financing and Contracting Methods.

A. Key Findings

- Currently the funding system offers limited incentives for providers to support increasing integrated employment outcomes for individuals who state a preference for individual work in the community. This includes how long-term supports are determined and funded by VR and DMH/DD.
- Current service options need to be revisited and restructured to support the services and funding needed for strong integrated employment outcomes:
 - Personal care services are covered by HCBS waiver funding

and are frequently utilized for individuals receiving four hours or less in a calendar day.

- Sheltered workshops bill day habilitation (payable after five hours in traditional day hab classrooms or engaging in sheltered work, including one hour for transportation, or a combination thereof).
 - Use of facility-based services (both employment services and non-work services).
 - Lack of clarity regarding how prevocational services could be used to advance a person's career interests.
- The current rate structure does not support the change in business models that is needed to develop new employment delivery methods. The state has not had a solid business model to ensure long-term supports were identified and funded for those who needed it.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- A thorough financial analysis is needed on the current rate structure prior to initiating changes in the rate methodology to comport with revised service definitions and the promotion of Alabama's employment first principles.
- DMH/DD staff are actively participating in the SELN Funding Workgroup in an effort to utilize the guided facilitation to clarify the critical aspects of systems change needed related to funding realignment.
- Review the current funding methodology, key assumptions, spending on professional development/competency-building, where services can happen (how space is used), and rates.
- Analyze DMH/DD's funding practices on cost-sharing (post-eligibility earned income) and how this is impacting an individual's pursuit of paid, integrated employment.

IV. **Training and Technical Assistance.**

A. Key Findings

- DMH/DD and VR have both funded the (optional) certificate based job coach/supported employment training through Virginia Commonwealth University open to DMH/DD and VR affiliated job developers, case managers, teachers agency administrators, as well as job coaches and others. This training is taught by consultants from Virginia Commonwealth University. Currently the training is offered twice per year. In addition, both

agencies along with the Alabama Developmental Disabilities Council and other DD partners have provided much non-certificate based training to providers' staffs and all stakeholders at numerous conferences and trainings throughout the state including the annual AL-APSE Conference (the premier employment conference in the state that focuses on improving and expanding opportunities for people with significant disabilities to attain employment), Alabama's Annual Transition Conference, an Annual AL Arc Sponsored DD Conference and many other forums and stakeholder meetings. Elst Interagency Team collaboration has led to several presentations of multiple team members at various statewide and local meetings for stakeholders. It has also led to the beginnings of planning for partnering with the AL Department of Post-Secondary Education (DPE) to potentially offer consistent, statewide training for provider staffs, as well as skills training, with or without credentialing for more individuals with developmental and other disabilities for potential employment. Without professional development opportunities, employment staff will not be clear on their role in improving outcomes for the people they support.

- Individuals and family members often lack exposure to the role of paid, integrated employment in a full community-based life. Consequently they frequently fearful and hesitant to consider such options and may not actively seek alternatives to their current service package. Additionally, it is not well known how employment impacts certain public benefits such as Social Security, or how to access and utilize available work incentives.
- To be strong coaches and advisors, all case managers need opportunities to gain a much better understanding of the role of integrated employment services for individuals seeking a full community-based life. This includes:
 - The different types of employment services offered by each system (supported employment, customized employment, self-employment, etc.).
 - The role of the vocational rehabilitation system for individuals engaged with the DD system and seeking long-term employment supports.
- Alabama lacks an extensive marketing plan to reach employers statewide that highlights employment first as a priority and success stories.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- While the VCU training is available to direct care staff, DMH/DD should lead an effort to establish required employment training for ongoing competency-building.
 - Case managers are the single point of contact for most families. Staff in this role must have the skills, training, and reference materials to be able to speak about employment opportunities, services, and the impact on benefits, etc. An investment in adequate training will improve the richness of employment discussions and ensure individuals and families are supported to consider all appropriate options.
 - Develop a consistent, statewide mechanism to sustainably build and maintain a competent workforce to deliver quality employment services. These options could include a statewide employment curriculum focused on establishing core competencies required for employment providers, and a percentage of employment provider staff achieving the certified employment specialist provider (CESP) certificate.
 - Such a system should also include continuing education around state of the art employment practices, similar to training received by Workforce Development System staff.
 - Work with the two-year college system in Alabama to establish educational opportunities for students in the field. Current discussions with the employment first committee are a step in the right direction on this activity.
 - Organizational change strategies for current providers to transform business practices to expand integrated community-based services and promote competitive employment should also be addressed.

- Tools should be developed to assist case managers to have meaningful employment discussions with individuals, their families and circles of support.

- Establish the principle that businesses are an essential partner in the state's employment initiative. Target marketing activities to reach the business community and connect with employers statewide, and by region. Identify resources to strengthen the work of individual job developers including linkages with economic development, statewide and regional workforce development boards, and identification of employer "champions".
 - Review opportunities for public sector hiring at the local, regional and state levels.
 - Review other state's examples such as the Regional

Employment Collaboratives in Massachusetts supporting job developer networks and efforts to build local business partnerships.

- Use lessons learned from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) grantees in Alabama to expand statewide the “disability resource coordinators working under the grant in selected counties, to ensure individuals with IDD are included in project activities.
- Partner with Alabama’s Business Leadership Network http://www.usbln.org/bln_al_birmingham.html to ensure the business in the AL BLN are engage in the states objectives to increase and support individuals with developmental disabilities to become employed in their businesses.

V. Interagency Collaboration.

A. Key Findings

- DMH/DD and the Department of Education have begun to explore mutual goals and potential collaborative efforts.
 - Survey responses indicate that individual, integrated employment is not often a familiar area for educators.
 - Expectations should be the same for everyone in school and what is available after high school so that informed choices are more readily made.
 - Limited availability of simple, informative materials for individuals and families to learn about the role of employment prior to transitioning to post-secondary options and adult life.
- Multiple stakeholders expressed confusion over when to refer an individual for vocational rehabilitation services. One stakeholder commented “*if person needs long-term supported employment services they cannot receive services from the Division of Rehabilitation*”.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- Establish the common principles related to employment across system partners and a process for evaluating current practices. This should include how sequenced funding would allow an individual to move seamlessly between systems as needed based on the expertise and role of each system and the individuals’

skills, needs and interests.

- Identify opportunities for internships and jobs during school transition years leading to continued employment or entrance into higher education for greater career opportunities as adults.
- Identify processes that assist individuals in gaining experience and/or obtaining employment in the least restrictive setting prior to even talking about possible day habilitation options and sheltered work programs.
- Identify common opportunities for strengthening families' understanding and role, and raising expectations at an early age.
- Identify statewide, regional and local activities to build interest and energy with new players. In 2014 the Alabama Transition Conference (ATC) will be in its 14th year; participation is just one example of reaching core local partners on a regular basis to create buzz and reinforce accurate information.

VI. Services and Service Innovations.

A. Key Findings

- The waiver program includes two definitions of supported employment. The first definition of supported employment per diem has been in the waiver for many years and states “supported employment consists of paid employment for persons for whom competitive employment at or above the minimum wage is unlikely without supports, and who, because of their disabilities, need ongoing support to perform in a work setting.”
 - This definition was not changed as not to disrupt current practice and a new supported employment definition was added to include individualized supported employment and consists of job development and job coaching.
 - Although the new definition is successfully in line with the CMS guidance regarding employment related services, not discontinuing the old definition and allowing segregated supported employment to continue, allows it to remain acceptable and confuses stakeholders on exactly what supported employment is.
- The waiver program also includes one definition of prevocational services that contains the following language: “prevocational services are provided to persons not expected to be able to join the general workforce or participate in a transitional sheltered workshop within one year. When compensated, individuals are paid at less than 50 percent of the minimum wage”.
 - CMS guidance states “**competitive integrated employment in the**

community for which an individual is compensated at or above the minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals without disabilities is considered to be the optimal outcome of prevocational services.

- DMH/DD’s Medicaid HCBS ID Waiver Service Catalog is a great reference for providers, case managers and individuals and their families, but could be expanded to include introductory context-setting information, and sample guiding questions to help facilitate team discussions involving case managers and families.
- Through survey responses, it was indicated that day habilitation is expressed as the first and primary option that is addressed with individuals being supported, instead of a discussion regarding employment.
- The type of effective and responsive transportation systems needed for individuals seeking community-based jobs are not available in many parts of the state and need improvement. This is particularly true for rural parts of the state.
- Service Planning
 - Alabama maintains a standardized case management plan, which is separate from the individual service plan.
 - The “Plan of Care” is a Medicaid-related document reflecting authorization codes but not the details of services to be received
 - Individual plans are not standardized and may vary by provider
 - Individuals may have a residential plan, and a separate day services plan
 - During the visit with case managers, there was variation on when and how an employment section of an individual plan would be used
- Case managers were interested in a discussion of case load size. Some reflected that being assigned 40 individuals was challenging to assure all tenets of person-focused planning were upheld.
- Alabama just completed the first year of Project Search projects in two counties and will be expanding to four more counties this year.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- Develop a strategy to discontinue use of the initial supported employment definition in the waiver and continue to use the second

definition that includes job development and job coaching and revise the prevocational services definition to include the language above regarding wages and the goal of the prevocational service to be integrated employment. Add language that every individual receiving prevocational service must have an employment outcome within their ISP. Consider a six-month review process to determine if progress is being made.

- Utilize the available SELN technical assistance resources to support DMH/DD's work on service definitions for waiver amendments.
 - Prevocational services should reflect expectations such as developing a work portfolio, gaining work experience and setting career expectations).

 - Transportation was identified as a critical factor to be considered in the development of an implementation strategy for improving employment outcomes especially for the rural areas in Alabama where limited public transportation is available.

 - Transportation should be a separate service, and not bundled into the prevocational and supported employment service rates.
- Acknowledge and address the issues with a growing waiting list through options that utilize innovations for building a full life without unnecessary dependency on just one (likely unpredictable) funding stream. New services and supports should be creative and flexible promoting integrated community employment options.

 - Clarify the role and use of volunteer opportunities in building expectations for work and learning new skills. Assist paid staff such as employment service providers and case managers, and individuals and families themselves, to advocate for volunteer options as a supplement but not replacement for paid full-time and part-time work.

 - Identify avenues to support apprenticeships and other skill-building opportunities for individuals.

VII. Employment performance measurement, quality assurance, and program oversight

A. Key Findings

- DMH/DD is currently collecting service utilization data but is not collecting employment outcome data. When states are not able to

determine the outcome of investing in certain services it is difficult to make the business case for systems change.

- DMH/DD displays only the information on service utilization data to supports coordinators and providers, not to individuals and their families.
- VR stated an interest in better determining who may have an interest or need for accessing VR-funded services that is not currently assessing their services.
- Program oversight does not include a mechanism for the Division to review service plans or identify goals which have been continued and not achieved for prolonged periods of time.

B. Potential Focal Areas

- Develop a comprehensive approach to data management and display that collects individual data rather than summary data as well as a clear strategy for using the resulting information to improve your system's investments. Allow the end user to "pull" the data in multiple ways to better meet the needs of individuals and different levels of the system.
 - Assure that those observing the DMH/DD system see the need for outcome data as a highly valued core aspect of a robust quality management process.
 - Focus discussions with internal and external partners on how to collect, manage and report basic outcome data such as hours worked and wages earned.
- Utilize the SELN to identify and access information from other states on their strategies for employment data systems.
- Identify performance benchmarks to gauge progress in expansion of integrated employment system-wide and who will use them.