

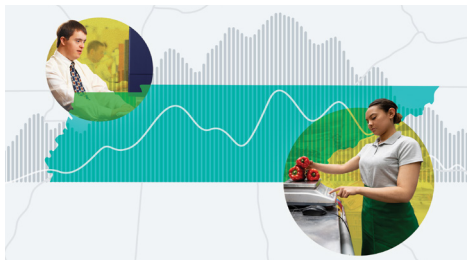
Supporting Competitive Integrated Employment Opportunities in Tennessee

September 2021



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Key Highlights

- Access to employment provides individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) opportunities to engage meaningfully in their communities, build life-long skills, and expand social relationships, among other benefits.
- Tennessee established the Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES program to align incentives for employment, independent living, and community integration for Medicaid beneficiaries with I/DD.
- Amerigroup Tennessee has demonstrated early success connecting individuals with I/DD to competitive integrated employment opportunities in alignment with their goals.

Overview

Having meaningful employment and other opportunities for community engagement and inclusion is important for most Americans of working age, including individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

Individuals with I/DD have a strong desire to participate in the labor force and obtain jobs in the community.¹ People with I/DD gain expanded social relationships, improved self-confidence, transferable skills, and increased self-determination when they are employed.^{2,3,4} Research has also shown some association between employment and better physical and mental health status.⁵



When employed, people with I/DD experience increased self-determination, confidence, and social relationships.

However, employment among individuals with I/DD lags significantly behind employment among people without disabilities. Recent research indicates that in 2018 only about 21 percent of working age adults with I/DD who receive home- and community-based services (HCBS) had a paid job in the community.⁶ This is substantially lower than the employment rate (66%) for people without disabilities that same year.⁷

In July 2016, Tennessee’s Medicaid program (TennCare) launched the Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES program to improve service delivery and integration of care for beneficiaries with I/DD.⁸ Among its goals, the ECF CHOICES program sought to align incentives for employment, independent living, and community integration—providing beneficiaries with I/DD a pathway to competitive integrated employment.⁹

Amerigroup Tennessee, which serves more than 475,000 Medicaid beneficiaries statewide, has made strides connecting individuals with I/DD to employment opportunities through the state’s ECF CHOICES program.¹⁰ This brief describes the health plan’s efforts to ensure people with I/DD are connected to employment supports that help them achieve their goals, as well as how these efforts have led to employment outcomes that surpass measures of employment nationwide.

Employment Opportunities for People with I/DD

People with I/DD have experienced significant barriers to employment, including limited opportunities for support and assistance in pursuing employment as part of the general workforce. Historically, many people with I/DD have been relegated to sheltered workshops or segregated work environments, frequently at subminimum wages with no benefits.¹¹

This narrow set of opportunities prevented many people from realizing their full potential and pursuing their employment interests. Over time, federal and state laws and policies have evolved in response to research, best practices, advocacy, the preferences of people with disabilities, and litigation. These changes have improved both the civil rights of individuals with I/DD to seek opportunities to work as well as the supports available to assist people with I/DD in their pursuit of employment.



Healthcare services and social supports play a key role in helping individuals obtain and sustain employment.

Connecting individuals with I/DD to job opportunities is not a one-size-fits-all approach. People have different goals and support needs, which may change over time, as well as varied interests, skills, cultural expectations, and preferences. Because of this, an individualized approach is most effective. Various publicly funded programs, accommodations, incentives, and services are available to assist people with I/DD to pursue jobs. For instance, vocational rehabilitation is a state-federal program that helps individuals enter into, maintain, or return to work. Supported employment services, which can vary by state, offer individualized supports to assist individuals with identifying their interests and structuring services and supports to make sure the person is set up for continued success.

These various programs and resources are designed to help individuals achieve their employment goals. For most individuals with I/DD, that goal is competitive integrated employment (CIE)—or what most individuals, regardless of disability status, would simply refer to as “work.” CIE means that individuals with I/DD have a job in the general workforce, and not in a segregated environment. They work in the same places, in the same jobs, and for equal pay as people without disabilities. CIE also means that individuals obtain jobs in typical workplace environments alongside co-workers who do not have disabilities; they have the same opportunities to engage with other employees, business customers, and typical day-to-day activities at the worksite.

For many individuals with I/DD, healthcare services and social supports play a key role in helping them obtain and sustain employment. For those enrolled in Medicaid managed care, health plans are an important partner in supporting individuals with I/DD in their employment journey. Health plans work closely with the individual, their support network, the state, and other service systems (e.g., schools) to identify and facilitate the right set of services and supports that help the individual achieve employment success.

Tennessee's ECF CHOICES Program

Tennessee established the ECF CHOICES program with the goal of supporting CIE and community living as the “first and preferred option” for all individuals with I/DD.¹² The ECF CHOICES program offers beneficiaries with I/DD access to a robust set of HCBS, including supports to help them achieve and maintain CIE.

The program provides individuals with a variety of employment supports, including varying levels of coordination, because each person typically has a different starting point with respect to interest in or experience working. Some may have previous or existing job experience and want to continue on that path. Others may not have any experience or adequate exposure to opportunities to make informed choices about work.



The ECF CHOICES program aligns incentives for employment, independent living, and community integration.

The enhanced employment program through ECF CHOICES includes more than a dozen benefits—coordinated by the health plan—that help individuals identify their interests and pursue their goals. Central to the ECF CHOICES program are two benefits called “exploration” and “discovery”—services during which an individual with I/DD has the chance to explore employment and see if an opportunity meets their interests.

For individuals who have limited exposure to work and might be unsure about pursuing employment, they are offered “exploration” which lasts 30 days and is a critical step in assessing an individual’s interest in employment and supporting their path to employment. During exploration, job coaches (credentialed contracted providers) spend time with the member, in their home and community, learning more about their interests and gaining a better understanding of their goals. Additionally, this step typically includes touring businesses and organizations to job shadow or conduct informational interviews. This process ensures the individual and their support network have enough information to make an informed decision about the employment opportunities and supports available to them.

If the individual chooses to pursue employment, but they need more support to find the right job match, then they are offered “discovery”—which lasts 90 days. During this period of time, job developers—also credentialed providers contracted by the health plan—use the person-centered plan and work with the individual and their support network to determine their interest in certain areas of the labor market; they also assess the individual’s skills and strengths. This process also identifies what jobs, environments, and workplace factors are most likely to align with the individual’s goals and facilitate their success. An extensive positive personal profile is developed that indicates the businesses or industries that could be targeted to match the individual’s identified skills and interests as revealed through this

“discovery” process. The job developer also helps identify any additional skills the individual may want to develop in order to be most successful at work, as well as how the support team can assist with job development.

Individuals with I/DD who are currently employed and want to continue in that job can receive ongoing supports from the health plan, but do not need to engage in the exploration or discovery services. Those who are working can get support through other available services and supports coordinated by the plan through the ECF CHOICES program—such as “job coaching” or “career advancement.” An individual who is interested in changing jobs or pursuing a different career path may decide to engage in the “discovery” service to re-assess their interests and available opportunities—working closely with a job developer. And ECF CHOICES provides the opportunity for individuals to receive “benefits counseling” services to help them understand how to manage their finances and publicly funded benefits when working.

Amerigroup Tennessee Provides Personalized Employment Support

Amerigroup Tennessee is helping execute the state’s vision of connecting individuals with I/DD to CIE opportunities. The health plan plays an important role overseeing all aspects of the ECF CHOICES program for the beneficiaries it serves—supporting and engaging directly with individuals and their support networks.



Amerigroup Tennessee employment specialists and support coordinators help individuals achieve their goals.

To ensure that individuals are successful in achieving their employment goals through ECF CHOICES, the health plan has two dedicated employment specialists on staff.¹³ The employment specialists start by identifying individuals with I/DD enrolled in the plan who are not currently employed or actively supported in job seeking. The employment specialists and support coordinators engage these individuals to determine their employment interests and then work to reduce barriers, facilitate the employment services that best fit their needs, and assist the member to obtain employment.

Regardless of an individual’s starting point, the employment specialists and support coordinators with the Amerigroup Tennessee health plan meet each person where they are—guided by the health plan’s person-centered planning approach and the resources available through the ECF CHOICES program.¹⁴ Amerigroup Tennessee engages each beneficiary individually—introducing them to different types of employment opportunities, learning whether they have had any work experience, and finding out where the individual wants to go on their employment journey. The health plan’s employment specialists and support coordinators are proactive in their outreach to new and existing enrollees—making sure they are aware of and receive the supports needed for success.



Health plan staff help individuals explore employment interests and identify what is a good fit.

Among the individuals with I/DD enrolled in ECF CHOICES who are not already working, health plan data from January 2019 through early 2020 indicate that a majority (55%) had an employment goal in their person-centered service plan.¹⁵ Further, of the beneficiaries who decided to try the “exploration” service and work with the contracted employment provider, approximately two-thirds (66%) decided to pursue employment at the end of the service.¹⁶

Health plan staff also actively support beneficiaries who are on the cusp of obtaining employment. Before an individual applies for a new job opportunity, the plan’s support coordinators may recommend “situational observation and assessment”—a benefit available under the ECF CHOICES program where the provider (e.g., job coach or equivalent) observes the individual in an employment setting to assess work habits, interpersonal engagement, and vocational skills.

This helps the member confirm their employment interest or determine whether a particular job type or setting may be a good fit. This also helps gauge the performance of the individual against the competencies and skills needed for the particular job or employment setting, as well as what supports and accommodations the individual may need for success. Employment specialists and support coordinators work with the individual to use this assessment to help them access what they need to further develop skills, hone their interests, determine potential job-related support needs, and learn what may or may not work for the person in a particular job or setting.

For individuals with I/DD served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES and who are employed, health plan staff coordinate the array of employment supports and other wraparound services that beneficiaries have access to, when needed. Critical wrap-around services can include transportation, community living support, peer-to-peer support, benefits counseling, and technology assistance. These services are an important part of helping individuals maintain their employment, achieve their goals, and improve their wellbeing.

Through these targeted efforts, along with the health plan’s overall person-centered approach, many individuals with I/DD are having a positive experience with the ECF CHOICES program.

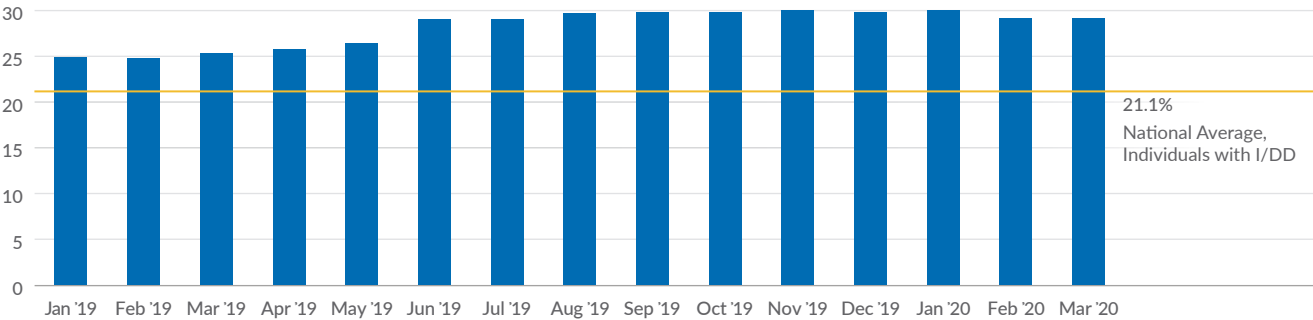
Amerigroup Tennessee Has Demonstrated Early Success

Data suggest that the health plan is successfully supporting individuals with I/DD in CIE opportunities as they work towards achieving their employment goals.

Throughout all of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, the statewide employment rate for individuals with I/DD served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES was 33 percent higher than recent nationwide benchmarks.^{17,18} (Figure 1) The average employment rate among the health plan’s beneficiaries was approximately 28.2 percent over this period, compared to the national average of 21.1 percent among working age adults with I/DD who receive HCBS.

The national averages included in the following figures provide a benchmark for comparison purposes. However, these benchmarks are imperfect as they are not adjusted for differences between the national population and Tennessee ECF CHOICES participants with respect to factors such as age and level of need, which could influence employment outcomes.

Figure 1
Average Employment Rate among Individuals with I/DD
Served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES, Statewide



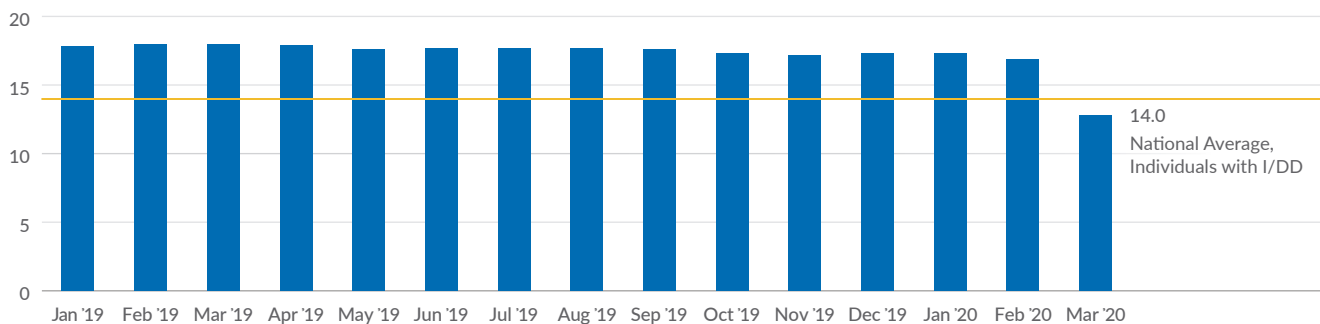
Source: Amerigroup Tennessee health plan.

Note: National average reflects 2018 data for working age adults with I/DD who receive HCBS, which is the most recent data available. See Winsor, J., et al. (2021). StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes through 2018. Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Individuals with I/DD served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES have worked more hours per week compared to recent estimates for the national average of hours worked per week among working-age adults with I/DD. (Figure 2) Overall, these individuals worked, on average, 17.3 hours each week from January 2019 through March 2020. This is approximately 23 percent higher than the nationwide average for working age adults with I/DD.¹⁹ Although the March 2020 figure decreased, it may reflect the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce overall.

Figure 2

**Average Hours Worked per Week among Individuals with I/DD
Served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES Who Have Employment, Statewide**



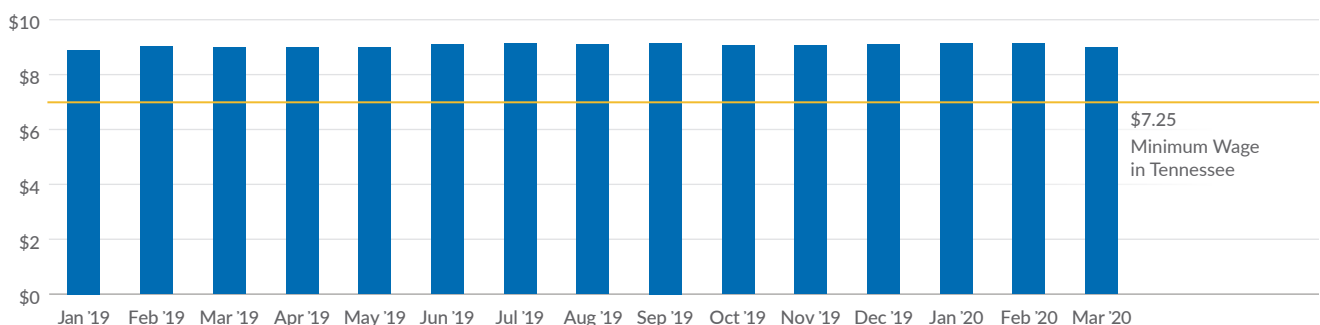
Source: Amerigroup Tennessee health plan.

Note: National average reflects 2018 data for working age adults with I/DD who receive HCBS, which is the most recent data available. See Winsor, J., et al. (2021). StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes through 2018. Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Individuals with I/DD served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES also had employment that, on average, paid more than the minimum wage. (Figure 3) From January 2019 through the end of March 2020, the average hourly wage was approximately \$9.06 per hour—or 25 percent higher than the state minimum wage over that period.

Figure 3

**Average Hourly Wage among Individuals with I/DD
Served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES Who Have Employment, Statewide**



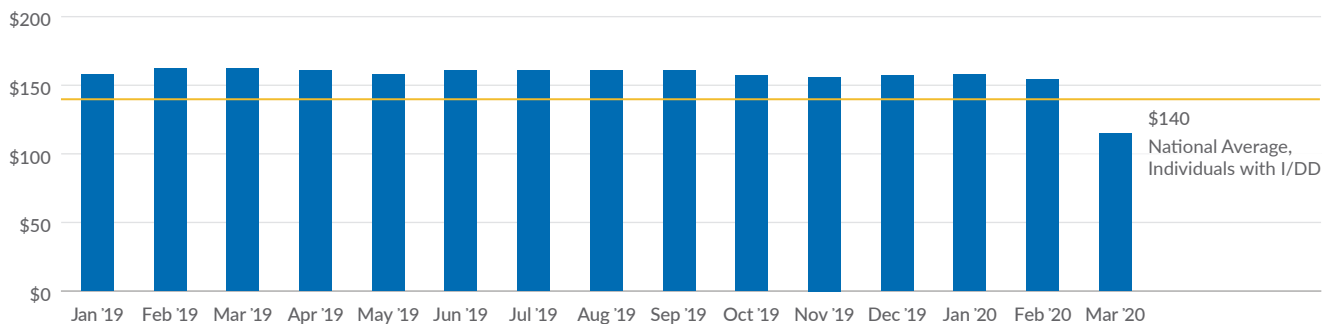
Source: Amerigroup Tennessee health plan.

Note: Minimum wage in Tennessee in 2019 and 2020 reflects the federal minimum wage of \$7.25. There is no state-specified minimum wage. Figure comes from U.S. Department of Labor.

Figure 4 illustrates the average pay per week for individuals with I/DD in ECF CHOICES served by Amerigroup Tennessee and who have a job. On average, from January 2019 through March 2020, individuals earned more each week (\$156 per week) than the nationwide average for working age adults with I/DD (\$140 per week).²⁰ This represents a difference of roughly 12 percent. Again, the decrease observed in March 2020 may reflect early effects of the pandemic on the employment market.

Figure 4

**Average Pay per Week among Individuals with I/DD
Served by Amerigroup Tennessee in ECF CHOICES Who Have Employment, Statewide**



Source: Elevance Health Public Policy Institute analysis of Amerigroup Tennessee health plan data. Average pay per week was calculated using data for average hourly wage and average hours worked each week. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole dollar.

Note: National average reflects 2018 data for working age adults with I/DD who receive HCBS, which is the most recent data available. See Winsor, J., et al. (2021). StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes through 2018. Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Conclusion

Employment-related services and supports are important Medicaid benefits for individuals with I/DD. Access to employment gives them opportunities to engage meaningfully in their communities, build life-long skills, expand social relationships and support networks, and enhance their feelings of self-worth. Employment can also be beneficial for their physical and mental health wellbeing.

Individuals with I/DD possess talents that can enrich the workforce and the companies that hire them, when individuals receive the necessary support to pursue CIE.²¹ However, employment rates for individuals with I/DD are low, even though many people with I/DD would like to obtain some level of employment.

Amerigroup Tennessee's provision of employment supports through the ECF CHOICES program demonstrate positive early results. It also highlights how Medicaid MCOs can be a valuable partner to states as they look to improve the experience of individuals in Medicaid by facilitating access to meaningful competitive integrated employment opportunities.

Endnotes

- ¹ Winsor, J., et al. (2021). StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes through 2018. Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. Retrieved July 14, 2021 from https://www.thinkwork.org/sites/default/files/files/state_data_2021_F%5B3%5D.pdf.
- ² Mank, D., Cioffi, A., & Yovanoff, P. (2003). Supported Employment Outcomes Across a Decade: Is There Evidence of Improvement in the Quality of Implementation? *Mental Retardation* 41(3), 188-197. Retrieved October 12, 2020 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12737612>.
- ³ Murphy, S.T., et al. (2002). People's Situations and Perspectives Eight Years After Workshop Conversion. *Mental Retardation* 40(1), 30-40. Retrieved February 6, 2020 from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11806731>.
- ⁴ Whitehouse, E., et al. (2016, December). Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities. The Council of State Governments and National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved July 27, 2021 from https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/employ/Work_Matters_Report.pdf.
- ⁵ Robertson, J., et al. (2019, June 10). The Association Between Employment and the Health of People with Intellectual Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 32(6), 1335-1348. Retrieved July 27, 2021 from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jar.12632>.
- ⁶ Winsor, J., et al. (2021).
- ⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019, May). Tight Labor Market Continues in 2018 as the Unemployment Rates Falls to a 49-Year Low. Monthly Labor Review. Retrieved August 4, 2021 from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2019/article/tight-labor-market-continues-in-2018-as-the-unemployment-rate-falls-to-a-49-year-low.htm>.
- ⁸ Under the ECF CHOICES program, services and supports for people with I/DD were added to, or "carved-in" to, the managed long-term services and supports program already delivered by the state's three statewide managed care organizations (MCOs). LTSS for people with I/DD that were carved in to managed care included three 1915(c) waivers and services in Intermediate Care Facilities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICF/IID). The entire Medicaid population has been in managed care since 1994, including people with I/DD. But prior to July 2016, I/DD beneficiaries only relied on Medicaid MCOs for physical health and mental health and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) services.
- ⁹ Division of TennCare. (No date). Employment and Community First CHOICES. Retrieved August 4, 2020 from <https://www.tn.gov/tenncare/long-term-services-supports/employment-and-community-first-choices.html>.
- ¹⁰ Figure reflects health plan membership through the first quarter of 2021.
- ¹¹ "Sheltered work" or "sheltered workshop" generally refer to facilities or organizations that employ people with disabilities separately from others. Sheltered work prevents people with disabilities from engaging in the most integrated work setting possible, including engaging with people without disabilities.
- ¹² Division of Health Care Finance & Administration. (No date). Employment and Community First CHOICES. PowerPoint Presentation. Retrieved July 29, 2021 from <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tenncare/documents/introductionToEcfChoices.pdf>.
- ¹³ The ECF CHOICES program requires that each Medicaid MCO employ one specialist.
- ¹⁴ The full list of employment services and supports available through ECF CHOICES includes: exploration, discovery, situational observation and assessment, job development plan, self-employment plan, job development start-up, self-employment start-up, job coaching for individual integrated employment, job coaching for self-employment, coworker supports, supported employment (small group), career advancement, benefits counseling, and integrated employment path services (prevocational).
- ¹⁵ Data from the Amerigroup Tennessee health plan. Percentages reflect the monthly average from January 2019 through March 2020.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Data after March 2020 were excluded from this paper, given the substantial impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on unemployment across the board.
- ¹⁸ Winsor, J., et al. (2021).
- ¹⁹ Benchmark for average hours worked per week comes from: Winsor, J., et al. (2021).
- ²⁰ Benchmark for average pay per week comes from: Winsor, J., et al. (2021).
- ²¹ See for example: Institute for Corporate Productivity. (2014). Employing People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Retrieved July 28, 2021 from <https://www.bestbuddies.org/imintohire/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2017/01/Employing-People-with-Intellectual-and-Developmental-Disabilities-i4cp-20141.pdf>.

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