



**Connecticut DDS**

**STEP: Supporting Transformation to Empower People**

Stakeholder Feedback Executive Summary

**DDS**

*April 2023*

## 1.0 Executive Summary

### 1.1 Background

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) awarded the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services (DDS) transformational funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). STEP is one DDS ARPA initiative. This report summarizes stakeholder input collected to inform the development of STEP. Stakeholder Input Sessions were held with individuals and families, providers, case managers, and DDS staff regarding their insights, preferences, questions, and concerns for potential STEP opportunities. This report also includes the results of surveys for individuals and families and providers. Although questions focused on STEP, participants also provided thoughts and feedback on existing DDS programs. This feedback is included to provide context and lessons learned for STEP.

STEP is intended to create more options for individuals to increase their independence, and to live and work in settings that are more integrated into the community. The STEP incentive payments are meant to support providers in their movement towards offering more support options for individuals receiving supports. This aligns with the DDS mission to partner with the individuals supported and their families, to support lifelong planning, and to join with others to create and promote meaningful opportunities for individuals to fully participate in their communities. This initiative includes flexibility to tailor to the needs of the individual, family, and the specific circumstances of the provider.

Consistent with the DDS Vision and five-year plan, the transformation provides opportunities for people supported by the Department to live, learn and work in more independent settings with the support they need and have meaningful roles in their communities using their strengths, talents, and passions. It allows people to make informed choices about where they live and work, and to pursue the lives they choose. This initiative is an opportunity for providers and individuals, with their families, to work together with increased incentives to meet the personal goals of individuals seeking more opportunities to live and work in their communities. DDS will provide incentives to providers for supporting individuals to transition from a congregate setting to more community-based supports.

### 1.2 Approach

In Fall 2022, DDS requested a Current State Assessment report researching promising practices for home and community-based services (HCBS) transformations to learn from the successes and challenges of other state agencies, including efforts in Connecticut. This assessment includes a list of opportunities and considerations for STEP. DDS sought stakeholder input on selected opportunities and considerations from the report to inform development of the STEP initiative. To gather this input, six stakeholder input sessions were held to collect detailed feedback from diverse stakeholders in small group settings. Additionally, three surveys were sent to stakeholders for input, one for individuals who receive supports and their families, one for providers, and one for DDS staff.

### 1.3 Themes

Several recurring themes emerged as a high priority for all groups. Some of these themes are systemic issues or barriers. STEP alone will not completely solve these issues. However, they are important to take into consideration throughout the planning, communication, and implementation of STEP.

### *Communications*

When speaking with providers, individuals and families, and DDS staff, people expressed that they did not know enough about STEP and its goals. People in all input sessions expressed dissatisfaction with the available program materials (particularly limited content on the DDS website). Providers and DDS staff who participated in the survey conveyed concern about fully understanding the scope of the program and being able to confidently speak on it. Suggestions to address this coming out of feedback include:

- Adjust messaging of STEP to recognize diverse needs of service-recipients, particularly individuals with high Levels of Need (LON).
  - Make it clear that transitions will be voluntary.
  - Emphasize that any transitions or changes to services will be person-centered, not one-size-fits-all.
- Prioritize filtering communications through trusted advisors (i.e., providers, case managers).
  - Proactively communicate with these stakeholders so they can support information sharing with individuals.
  - Ensure they have the right resources to answer questions effectively.
- Establish forums for both providers and case managers to share best practices for transitions.
  - This will help spread awareness of successful approaches and enhance collaboration.
- Expand peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities between individuals receiving supports.
  - DDS already provides some opportunities for this. Publicize them and integrate within STEP's approach.

### *Individualization of Supports*

Participants emphasized the importance of an **individualized approach to the transition process**, given the diverse needs and preferences of the population DDS serves. Survey comments from individuals and families emphasized these concerns. Some participants expressed a perception that STEP is single-minded in prioritizing competitive, integrated employment and independent residential settings. This can be off-putting for families and providers who **feel that the individuals they support are not always equipped for these changes**. There is a hope that STEP will be more fluid, with options to switch between setting or employment options as needed. Overall, across stakeholder groups, there is emphasis on **utilizing person-centered planning before moving forward with transition** conversations to ensure that the fit is right for the individual. Suggestions to support these efforts included:

- Create program one-pagers for various audiences to explain purpose, scope, and goals.
  - Use plain language, infographics, and other easy to understand approaches so that materials can stand alone.
- Develop an exhaustive menu of residential and day supports options.
  - Make it very clear what families and individuals can opt into and how programs differ from existing settings and opportunities.

### *Workforce Recruitment and Retention*

The impacts of the workforce crisis and staffing shortages were a key concern across all groups. Providers are struggling to staff current services and supports, and many expressed that they are unable to think beyond the current day-to-day staffing needs. Participants shared this as a significant challenge for providers, resulting in extremely limited bandwidth to plan for and implement transformational

change for STEP at their agency. Additionally, families expressed concern about adequately staffing transitions to more independent settings given the acute workforce shortages.

- Develop relationships with local colleges and universities to create a recruiting pipeline for strong, experienced candidates to serve as Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).
- Work to create a more flexible system with fewer administrative burdens. Additional administrative support for provider agencies would help free up additional time for existing staff.
- Coordinate STEP efforts with the other workforce-related ARPA initiatives (e.g., Enhance HCBS Workforce).

### *Transportation*

Stakeholder groups universally recognized the challenge of transportation expenses and logistics, particularly to and from job sites and other day activities. This was also reflected in survey results. Participants noted that for residential transitions, a lack of transportation can be isolating and make it difficult to access medical appointments and community services and events. Many **geographic areas are not well served by public transportation**. When individuals are traveling alone to job sites, Uber/Lyft and other private services can become **extremely expensive**. Additionally, transportation needs can **make transitions more complicated** if a new residence or employment opportunity is not accessible from existing routes. Suggestions to address included:

- Address shortage of affordable and accessible transportation options, especially in rural areas.
- Investigate group transportation options among other alternatives.

*Note: For the full Stakeholder Feedback Report, please visit the [DDS Website](#).*