

Supported Employment in Vermont is Competitive and Integrated

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THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT
**CENTER ON DISABILITY &
COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

Data Briefs are straightforward summaries of a topic supported by data and references.

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PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF:

The purpose of this data brief is to share the history and trends of employment for Vermonters with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Vermont has received national and international attention because disability-based subminimum wages and sheltered workshops were eliminated over two decades ago. Because Vermont is regarded as an example for making such a transition, it is critical to understand the data and historical context.

Some advocates for keeping disability-based subminimum wages have reported that supported employment has not benefited people with disabilities in Vermont and other states that prioritize supported employment. For example, in testimony to the Minnesota legislature, one advocate referred to the employment of Vermonters with disabilities as "deeply disturbing," stating: "In Vermont, there are now fewer developmentally disabled adults in supported employment than in 2002, when employment workshops closed" (Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Human Services, 2023).

This assertion does not align with what has happened in Vermont.

BACKGROUND:

Vermont is a small rural state with the nation's second-smallest population. Based on the 2021 data, the population of Vermont is 645,570 with much of the population in the Chittenden County area.

The closure of Brandon Training School in 1993 was a turning point in the care for individuals with developmental disabilities as it marked the end of reliance on an institutional model of

care and underscored the commitment to create supports and services necessary for people to live with dignity, respect and independence within their communities.

1996 DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES ACT

The Vermont State Legislature embedded into law the Developmental Disabilities Act of 1996 requiring the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, through the Developmental Disabilities Services Division, to adopt the [State System of Care Plan](#) for Developmental Disabilities Services that describes the nature, extent, allocation and timing of services that will be provided to people with developmental disabilities and their families.

The System of Care Plan is intended to instruct how legislatively appropriated funding will be allocated to:

- Serve individuals with significant developmental disabilities.
- Help people achieve their personal goals.
- Continuously improve the system of supports for individuals with developmental disabilities within available resources.

Since resources are never sufficient to meet all needs, eligibility criteria were established by the State of Vermont and are determined by the designated agency in each county. The System of Care Plan is designed to serve those with the greatest need.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT IN VERMONT

Vermont launched its first community-based supported employment program in 1980. This pilot program was created based on the value that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities could have regular jobs in the community.

The overall success of these various demonstration projects led the U.S. Department of Education-Rehabilitation Services Administration to fund states with multi-year grants to implement statewide systems-change supported employment efforts.

The initial federal investment in systemic change in the 1980s and 1990s exceeded \$100 million with funding more than 55 three-to-five-year grants (Mank, 1994).

In 1982 the University of Vermont received a grant and started providing support to expand the pilot. (Masterson, 2016).

Sheltered workshops gradually closed as technical assistance and systems change ramped up and people found employment in the community or received other developmental disabilities services, such as community supports and home supports.

Funding was stopped for new entrances to sheltered workshops in 2000.

Two years later Vermont closed its last sheltered workshop for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, becoming the first state with no sheltered workshop.

WHAT IS SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT?

According to the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL):

“Supported employment involves a wide range of services, including person-centered employment planning, job search assistance, assistance in negotiating job accommodation or modification, on the job training, follow-along services for duration of employment, career enhancement supports, and advocacy skills.”

—Vermont DAIL, 2023a

People receive different services when they have supported employment. Many who are receiving supported employment services are working, and others may be searching for jobs or between jobs.

It is important to note that supported employment in Vermont includes only individual placements. There are no group sites or enclaves. In addition, some people with intellectual and developmental disabilities secure jobs without receiving supported employment services.

In 2018, a survey of Vermonters with intellectual and developmental disabilities found that just over one-third (36%) were working. About one-quarter (24%) of those working were not receiving supported employment services (National Core Indicators, 2019).

THE GOAL OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

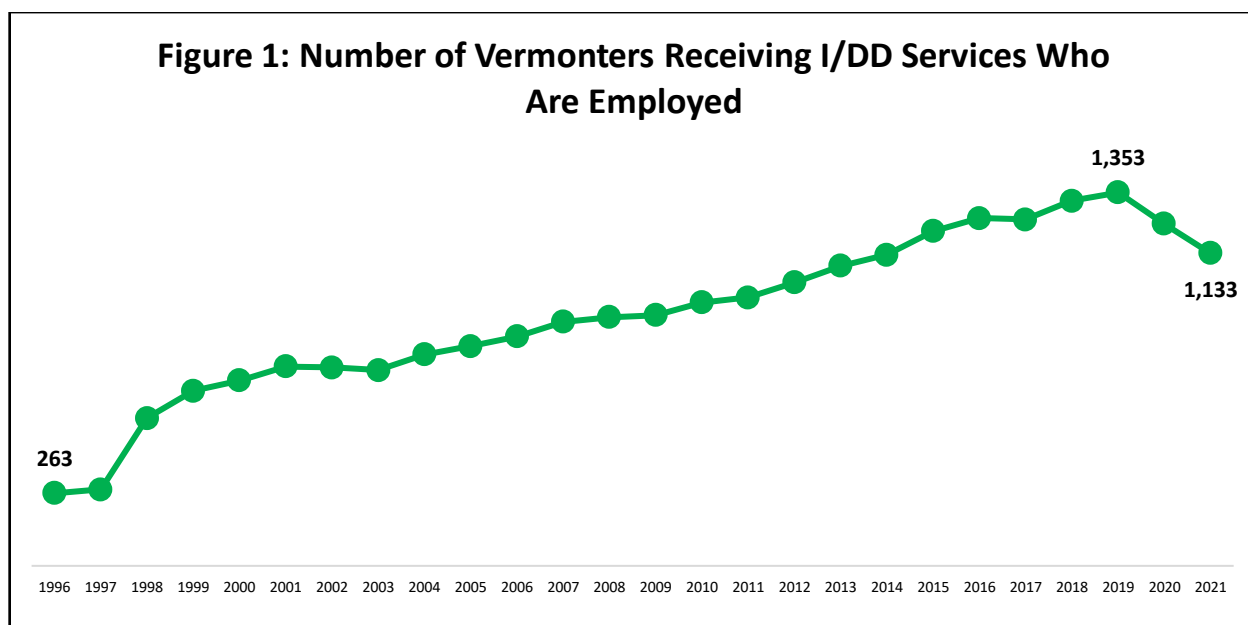
The goal of supported employment services is for the person with a disability to achieve *competitive integrated employment*.

Such employment is defined as full or part-time work with the same opportunities as non-disabled workers in the same position including same salary, same benefits, opportunities for advancement, and is based in the community with interactions with people without disabilities in their job (State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program; State Supported Employment Services Program; Limitations on Use of Subminimum Wage, 2016).

QUESTIONS RAISED ABOUT SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

This section shares Vermont data and historical context. It is organized as responses to two questions raised by critics of ending subminimum wage and sheltered workshops.

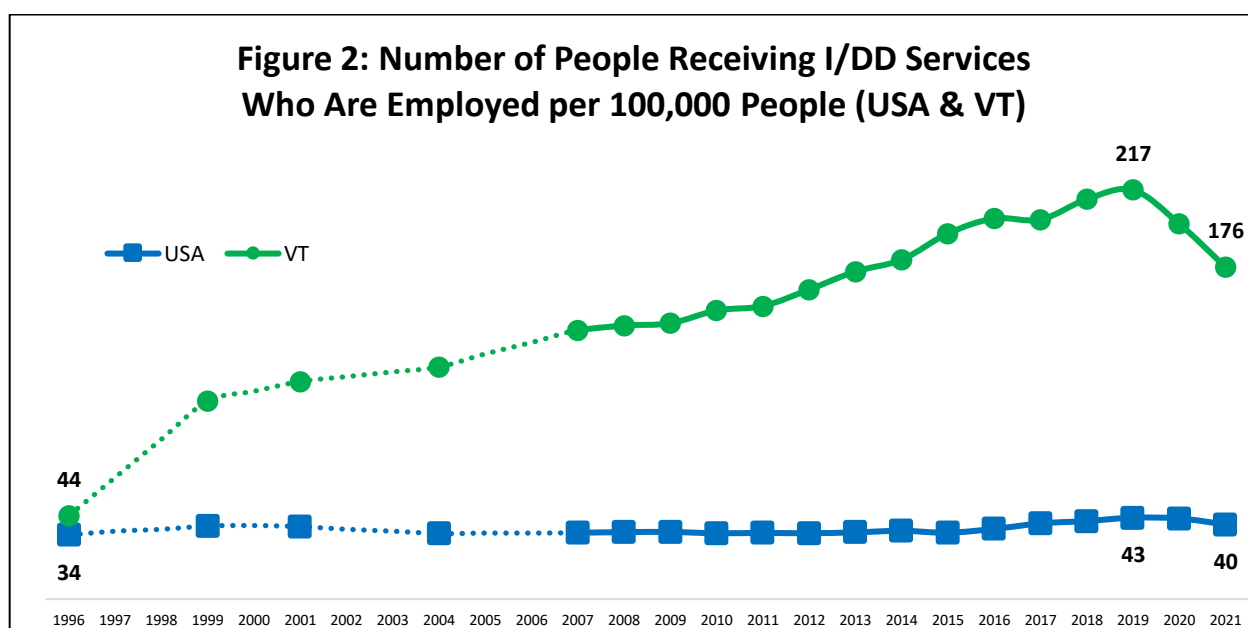
<p>QUESTION 1:</p> <p>Will people with disabilities still have opportunities to work?</p>	<p>As shown in Figure 1, the number of Vermonters with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving community and employment services (also called I/DD services) who were working increased steadily before the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>There was a drop in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 State of Emergency that limited the availability of direct support workers and temporarily closed many businesses.</p> <p>In 1996, 263 people receiving services were working, compared to 1,353 in 2019 (Vermont DAIL, 2023b). That is a 414% increase.</p> <p>For comparison, the population of Vermont increased by only 14% during that same period (U.S. Census, 2021). We can also focus on the time since closing the last sheltered workshop (2002). Between 2002 and 2019 there was an 88% increase in people working.</p>
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Note: Drop in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It can be useful to look at these numbers relative to the population of Vermont.

The number of people receiving I/DD services who were employed per 100,000 people in the population has been steadily increasing over time. This rate is also much higher than the total rate for the United States (see Figure 2, Statedata, 2023a). Like the previous figure, this rate decreased significantly in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



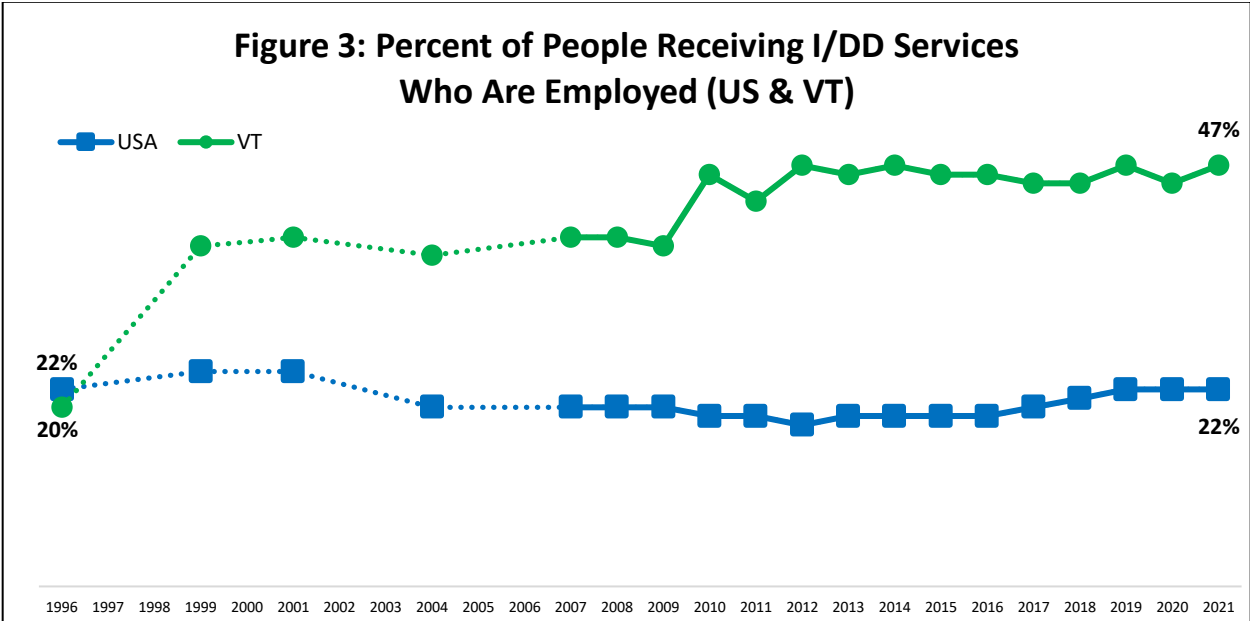
Note: Data not available for all years. Dotted lines show gaps in data collection. Drop in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, this trend can be examined as the number of people working as a percentage of everyone receiving I/DD services (employment and community services).

In 1996 Vermont and the United States had similar percentages (20% in Vermont and 22% for the United States). Vermont saw a steady increase between 1996 and 2010.

Since 2010 the percent has remained fairly level around 46%. The national data has remained stable near 22% from 1996 to 2021 (StateData, 2023b).

Notably, the agency that housed the last sheltered workshop (that closed in 2002) had an employment rate of 66% in 2021. (Vermont DAIL, 2023b).



Note: Data not available for all years. Dotted lines show gaps in data collection.

QUESTION 2:

Will eliminating subminimum wage take away choices?

Vermont agencies with sheltered workshops did not close; they transformed their segregated vocational services to community-based employment. In fact, agencies generally grew by increasing the services they provided. Individuals with high support needs were not left behind. Supported employment, including self-employment, can assist individuals with high needs to gain employment.

The shift in philosophy and practice from facility-based to community-based employment services also shifts energy and resources. Since Vermont has no segregated employment, other opportunities are nurtured and supported, including:

- [Project Search](#) (2011) in 3 locations.
- Post-secondary education programs like [Think College at the University of Vermont](#) (2010).
- [College Steps](#) (2011) at 3 state colleges.
- [SUCCEED](#) (2007), a post-secondary transitional living program.

People who would have been relegated to sheltered workshops are now students in these educational/vocational programs resulting in employment.

The State of Vermont has been recognized twice by the international [Zero Project](#) whose mission is working for a world with zero barriers. Worldwide, the Zero Project finds and shares solutions that improve the daily lives and legal rights of all persons with disabilities.

In 2017, Vermont was awarded the [Policy Award for Inclusive Employment](#). In 2021, Vermont was awarded another [Policy Award for Post-Secondary Education Initiative](#).

CONCLUSIONS

The number of Vermonters with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving supported employment has steadily increased over time.

This trend began during early initiatives to prioritize supported employment and has continued for over two decades, since the last sheltered employment workshop closed.

Despite the recent drop in employment with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no evidence for Runge's assertion (Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Human Services , 2023) that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have fewer employment opportunities in Vermont.

Limitations of this data brief:

It is important to recognize some limitations with this data brief.

First, we cannot report on the total number of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities working who live in Vermont. Available data focuses on people receiving I/DD services.

Second, to compare Vermont to the United States overall, data was not available for all years. Historical data was collected by StateData, a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. They gather data through a survey of state developmental disabilities services agencies, and the survey was not conducted annually until 2007.

Third, we do not have access to current data on the types of jobs, wages, hours worked, and other important indicators of employment.

What can we learn from Vermont?

The subminimum wage model is outdated and not needed when there are so many other options available.

Services have improved over the years with supported employment, customized employment, self-employment and expanding post-secondary education programs.

When people with disabilities are in their communities as employees, coworkers, and entrepreneurs, the community is richer for it. Employers will hire and include people with disabilities at a competitive wage because people want to work and are valued and reliable employees.

When there are no sheltered workshops, and individualized supports are provided, competitive work and community belonging becomes the norm.

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