Ohio's Technology First Policy: Enabling Swift Delivery of Remote Supports During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background

In March of 2012, Ohio became an Employment First state with the signing of its policy by Governor John Kasich. As the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) and other key stakeholders implemented this policy over the ensuing years, they repeatedly encountered lack of access to technology as a significant barrier to employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). They raised concerns about the limited availability of funding for technology through disability service agencies and the limited access to high-speed internet for people with IDD in their homes. Ohio DODD not only realized that technology could benefit people with IDD in many ways, but also noted the projected growth in the demand for technology-based services and supports. In May of 2018, Governor Kasich signed an executive order making Ohio the first state to have a Technology First initiative, an effort to expand access to assistive technology and remote supports for people with IDD.

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Implementation

As a Technology First state, Ohio began by establishing a statewide Technology First Council. The ten-member Council was comprised of Directors from the DODD, the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD, Ohio's State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation), and other stakeholders including disability service providers, self-advocacy organizations, individuals and families, and university researchers in assistive technology. The Council worked on adjusting state policy to align Ohio administrative code waivers with the Technology First policy to make technology-related expenses reimbursable. They also identified barriers at the state and county levels and recommended best practices for expanding access to and use of technology. Additionally, they established a focus on increasing children's use of technology in educational systems, leading to better outcomes for youth transitioning to employment and postsecondary education.

Ohio's DODD and OOD collaborated with county boards and their other partners to ensure that if there is a technological solution that can provide a service or meet a person's support need, this solution is to be considered first in their service and support plan. Technological solutions cannot replace in-person support all of the time, but the right technological solution can come with many benefits, including increased independence and personal freedom for the individual. In an employment situation, technology might be used to complete specific tasks, facilitate communication with coworkers, and help to sustain an individual's focus. The policy also authorizes "remote supports" or "remote monitoring," which allows employment staff or others to provide support using the technology over a communication platform.

Impact

Ohio's Employment First and Technology First Initiatives fit well together to ensure that people eligible for services through DODD will have increased opportunities to live, work, and thrive in their homes and communities through state-of-the-art planning, innovative technology, and supports that focus on their talents, interests, and skills. Teams are beginning to consider technology solutions at the onset of employment discussions, which leads to a wider array of possible employment opportunities. These earlier conversations have led to greater independence and have reduced the need for in-person staffing at employment locations.

Technology has also been used to augment and sometimes substitute on-the-job, in-person support. Solutions to common problems like staying on tasks, requiring further instruction, navigating transportation, taking medication while at work, and even virtual job interviews have been aided and sometimes solved by technology. The investment in technology across the state is evident when you speak to individuals who have had their lives changed for the better. They are more independent, able to live on their own, have less in-person staff, and work in and engage in their community in new and different ways.

Having a strong base of technology also gave Ohio a tremendous advantage in delivering virtual supports during the state of emergency. There have been more instances of off-site job coaching via smartphone and more use of technology to help people sustain employment (e.g., knowing when to take a break, knowing when to reach out to supervisors and/or job coaches during the day). Without having a pre-existing focus on assistive technology and remote supports prior to COVID, Ohio most likely would not have been able to respond as successfully.

Suggestions for replication

» Ohio proactively addressed and identified technology barriers with a formal policy, showing a deep commitment to improving access to integrated employment.

» Ohio established a Technology First Council of diverse stakeholders to create investment in addressing statewide technology barriers for individuals with IDD.

» Core to the policy was a strategy to ensure a method for funding the technology.

» The existence of this policy pre-pandemic enabled Ohio to swiftly pivot to remote, technology-based supports during a time of crisis.

For more information visit:

https://dodd.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/dodd/about-us/resources/tech-first/Technology-First/