

LINKING YOUTH TRANSITION SUPPORT SERVICES: RESULTS FROM TWO DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

by Christa Bucks Camacho and Jeffrey Hemmeter*

Many youths with disabilities, especially those receiving or potentially eligible for Social Security benefits, need assistance as they transition into adulthood. Upon completing secondary school, they face an abrupt end to provider-initiated public entitlement services. They often lack the knowledge and support to access and link fragmented adult support services. This article presents an overview of two projects in the Social Security Administration's Youth Transition Demonstration: California's Bridges to Youth Self-Sufficiency and Mississippi's Model Youth Transition Innovation. We report key outcomes and highlight the experience of one youth in each project who successfully completed the program.

Introduction

Many youths with disabilities, especially those receiving or potentially entitled to Social Security benefits, need transition assistance as they reach adulthood. Upon completing secondary school, they face an abrupt end to the publicly provided services they received through the education system. They are often not prepared to access adult services, such as vocational rehabilitation, if those services are not educational entitlements.¹ If transitioning youths desire support services after they begin higher education or go to work, they must identify themselves as having a disability, provide documentation of their disability, and formally request accommodations and services, often for the first time (GAO 2009). The Social Security Administration (SSA) designed the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) projects partly to link the fragmented support system currently in place. More broadly, YTD projects addressed low expectations about employment and self-sufficiency from the individual, his or her family, and society.

Over 1 million youths aged 14–25 receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments, and approximately 2.2 million SSI recipients are younger than age 30 (SSA 2012). Presently, some young SSI recipients exit the program as a result of a continuing disability review or an age-18 redetermination.² Transition supports and services that enable workforce entry could keep many other youths from remaining dependent on SSI for the rest of their lives. Rupp and Scott (1995) estimated that SSI youth recipients remain in the program 27 years on average.³ In 2010, SSI paid \$7.8 billion to youths aged 13–25, or approximately \$650 million a month (SSA 2012).

Selected Abbreviations

CDOR	California Department of Rehabilitation
DI	Disability Insurance
EN	employment network
GEIE	general earned income exclusion
IDA	individual development account

* When this article was written, Christa Bucks Camacho was a social insurance specialist in the Office of Program Development and Research (OPDR), Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP), Social Security Administration (SSA). She is currently with the Office of Budget Finance Management, SSA. Jeffrey Hemmeter is an economist with OPDR, ORDP, SSA.

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Selected Abbreviations—Continued

MDRS	Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Service
MYTI	Model Youth Transition Innovation
SEIE	student earned income exclusion
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSN	Social Security number
YTD	Youth Transition Demonstration

For young SSI recipients, one of the most significant barriers to employment is that they do not know how earnings will affect their SSI payments. The youths, their families, and their teachers lack information on how to use the work incentives available to SSI recipients. Teachers and other potential information sources may not even know that the youth receives SSI. Less than one-quarter of young SSI recipients' families have discussed or even heard of SSA's work incentives (Loprest and Wittenburg 2005). The YTD projects sought to raise awareness of those incentives as part of their goal to provide youths and their families with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. In turn, participants would become less reliant on SSI and other assistance programs, such as Medicaid, thus lowering public costs.

For YTD participants who were SSI recipients or Social Security Disability Insurance (DI) beneficiaries, SSA waived certain rules that restrict program eligibility or limit payments for those with work earnings. Those waivers modified existing SSI or DI work incentives to allow YTD youths to retain more of their earnings so they could save or make work- and education-related investments. Table 1 describes the work incentives and the associated YTD waivers.

Ten YTD projects operated in eight states. This article examines two of them: California's Bridges to Youth Self-Sufficiency (Bridges) and Mississippi's Model Youth Transition Innovation (MYTI). Both projects assigned participants nonrandomly and developed services to help clients successfully transition into adulthood.⁴ Each YTD project provided different combinations of services, but all 10 were designed to improve educational and work outcomes for participants. They generally targeted youths aged 14–25 who were potentially entitled to or already receiving SSI payments or DI benefits.⁵ Bridges predominantly served youths aged 18 or

older (68 percent of participants) while MYTI focused its efforts on younger clients (57 percent were aged 16 or younger).

All of the YTD projects sought to increase the self-sufficiency of transition-age youth with disabilities. That goal, which may not be realized until many years after YTD participation, generally takes the form of increased employment and decreased dependence on public benefits, along with improved quality of life. Bridges used a coordinated system of services and supports to help youths and their families achieve those ends. With the support of community and interagency collaborators, MYTI applied “discovery” techniques⁶ and customized employment⁷ to facilitate the transition from high school to work for students with significant disabilities.

Bridges served 504 youths and MYTI served 184 youths from December 2003 through September 2009. MYTI originally planned to serve 319 youths, but lowered its goal after Hurricane Katrina disrupted some of its operations. This article summarizes the Bridges and MYTI projects, reports some key outcomes, and highlights the experiences of one youth from each project who successfully completed the program. The information in this article comes from two primary sources. First, the management information system used by project staff to record their efforts provided aggregate information on the participants' profiles, services received, and outcomes. Second, interviews with staff, partners, and youths were rich sources of information, providing the stories of representative clients. Because Bridges and MYTI served different populations and provided different services, we discuss the projects separately under each of five topics: organization, services, statistics, case studies, and sustainability.

Organization

In this section, we describe the organization of the Bridges and MYTI projects, focusing on where services were provided and on project staffing structure.

Bridges

Bridges began as a YTD project funded by the SSA and the California Department of Rehabilitation (CDOR). The project operated in seven school districts chosen to reflect the state's geographic, industrial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Bridges' two key staff positions were benefits counselor and service coordinator. The benefits counselor educated

participants and their families about disability benefits from Social Security and other public programs, YTD waivers, and the effect of earnings on monthly SSI and DI payments. The service coordinator provided information on available school-based and adult services and supports. Additionally, a local project manager monitored YTD project activities, conducted bimonthly local advisory meetings, and facilitated partnerships with local agencies, community organizations, and businesses.

A state-level steering committee guided the project and provided an arena for collaboration and information sharing. The committee included the project managers and representatives from CDOR and other state agencies, the regional Social Security office, and the World Institute on Disability. The committee met twice yearly to provide oversight, evaluate progress, and offer suggestions for collaboration. The committee also helped with state-level system changes deemed necessary for a successful intervention.

Table 1.
SSA work incentives and the effects of YTD waivers

Work incentive	Description	Policy change under YTD waiver
SSI		
Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE)	Enables recipients who are students to exclude a certain amount of earnings from countable income and thus avoid reductions in SSI payments. In 2009 and 2010 SSA excluded the first \$1,640 of a student's earnings each month, to a maximum of \$6,600 in a year. SEIE eligibility ends when a recipient attains age 22.	Age limit is waived for YTD participants for as long as they attend school regularly.
General Earned Income Exclusion (GEIE)	Enables most SSI recipients to exclude from countable income the first \$65 of earnings plus one-half of additional earnings.	YTD participants can exclude from countable income the first \$65 of earnings plus three-quarters of additional earnings.
Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS)	Enables SSI recipients to exclude from countable income and resources amounts paid for certain expenses, such as the cost of owning a car, pursuing an education, and purchasing assistive technology, to achieve a specific SSA-approved work goal.	YTD participants can also use a PASS to explore career options or pursue additional education.
Individual Development Account (IDA)	Provides a trust-like account for SSI recipients to save for a specific goal, such as purchasing a home, going to school, or starting a business. SSA matches earnings deposited in an IDA, often at \$2 for every \$1 deposited by the participant. The money accumulated in an IDA is excluded when determining SSI eligibility, and the earnings deposited during a month are excluded when determining the SSI payment amount.	A YTD participant may also use an IDA to save for other approved goals.
SSI and DI		
Continuing Disability Reviews and Age-18 Redeterminations (Section 301)	Benefits based on disability may continue despite a negative Continuing Disability Review or age-18 medical redetermination if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the beneficiary is participating in any of certain programs; and • SSA determines that continued participation will increase the likelihood that the individual will remain off the disability rolls permanently once benefits stop. <p>These "likelihood" determinations normally must be made on a case-by-case basis.</p>	If SSA determines that medical disability has stopped and the participant is no longer eligible for assistance, he or she can continue to receive both cash benefits and health care services while participating in YTD.

SOURCE: SSA.

NOTE: For full descriptions of these and other SSA work incentives, see <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/redbook>.

Given its organization within the school system, Bridges recruited youth primarily from the local school districts; however, referrals from community partners were also important. Although Bridges recruited youths with all disabilities within the project area, priority went to participants with multiple disabilities and barriers to employment. Bridges reached out to youths in and out of school, in the foster care system, in the juvenile justice system, and from diverse cultural backgrounds. Youths and their families received letters inviting them to attend an orientation workshop offering information on work incentives. They were also assured that Bridges staff would respond to questions about (and advocate as needed with) SSA, employers, community providers, and public agencies.

MYTI

MYTI was funded by SSA and the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS). Originally, MYTI was implemented in Gulfport Municipal and Harrison County School Districts, with MDRS serving as the lead agency. However, Gulfport's participation stopped after 3 years because damage from Hurricane Katrina obstructed efforts to provide the support required for the project interventions. In September 2006, Jackson County Public Schools replaced Gulfport. MYTI recruited youths with disabilities from within those school districts.

MYTI personnel worked directly in the schools. Teachers were trained to use individual discovery techniques and customized employment approaches in order to facilitate the transition from high school to work for students with significant disabilities. MYTI's key staff positions were classroom teacher, transition specialist, and benefits counselor. The classroom teacher facilitated the discovery process to determine each participant's interests, abilities, and vocational experiences. The transition specialist provided job development, customized planning, and portfolio development to help working-age participants use the customized employment process. The benefits counselor educated participants and their families about disability benefits from Social Security and other public programs, YTD waivers, and the effect of earnings on SSI and DI payments.⁸

MYTI emphasized person-centered planning and featured Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), an innovative approach to transition support. Customized employment was another key feature and many employers assisted the project by providing precareer development for participants.

Services

In this section, we provide a high-level description of the services provided by the Bridges and MYTI projects. For more details on the services provided, see CDOR (2009) and Martinez and others (2010).

Bridges

The project was designed to help youths "pursue their interests, goals, and dreams while living a happy and productive life" (CDOR 2009, 9). Specifically, Bridges provided interventions to promote personal and financial self-sufficiency, employment (whether full-time, part-time, or volunteer), and life quality (through employer relationships and community partners). The service delivery model emphasized self-determined goals, high expectations, a positive vision of the future, collaborative partnerships, and self-advocacy skills.

All YTD sites provided employment and benefit counseling services. Bridges also focused on work incentive and benefit advice, person-centered planning and early intervention, job development and placement, and intensive service coordination. Those services were built on transition initiatives already available to individuals in the same age range as Bridges participants. CDOR partnered with the California Department of Education, local school districts, and SSA field offices to assure service delivery. Bridges benefits counselors and service coordinators uniformly directed (or themselves provided) service delivery at all seven Bridges sites. That was accomplished through individual meetings and training workshops that accommodated the schedules of the participants and their families. In workshops on SSI and DI work incentives, for example, participants learned to manage a calendar and filing system to track correspondence and report earnings to SSA.

For youths and their caregivers who needed to better organize services and identify additional needs, benefits counselors and service coordinators developed an individualized "action plan." This dynamic plan documented all the needed services and over time, it helped youths and their families to coordinate current and upcoming services on their own.

Placing benefits counselors and service coordinators in the schools allowed Bridges participants to continue using their schools' career development programs. One such program coached participants in preemployment skills, career awareness, and planning for high school. A similar program emphasized

employment and independent living skills; it served youths aged 14–19 who attended high school and had individualized education plans. State agencies, employers, and local colleges collaborated to provide career exploration services, work readiness skills, work-based learning opportunities, paid and unpaid internships, entry-level employment, transition planning, and follow-up services.

High school students who had moderate or severe disabilities and met certain other conditions were also eligible for the Transition Partnership Project (TPP), jointly administered by the school districts and CDOR. That project worked with city governments, nonprofit groups, public transit agencies, adult service providers, community colleges, state agencies, and employers to provide career planning and employment services for youths who wanted a job. Clients also received additional career services (coordinated with CDOR) including career assessment, career planning, job-specific skills training, worksite evaluations, job coaching, specialized job development, job placement, and follow-up supports to ensure work retention.

Bridges also coordinated with several other CDOR programs for individuals aged 19 or older with moderate or severe disabilities. Those adult programs, run by the school districts or colleges in partnership with CDOR, focused on transition planning, emphasizing employment and independent living. Clients may have also received a modified education (via adult schools, regional occupational programs,⁹ colleges, community-based instruction, and worksite training), transportation and mobility skills, independent living skills, job coaching, and Americans with Disabilities Act accommodation information.

Bridges staff helped coordinate those and other transition services (such as health care) for eligible youths. They coordinated benefits and services, held SSI and DI benefits counseling workshops, helped youths with their person-centered action plans, helped to establish family support networks, mentored clients, and trained community stakeholders about SSI program rules and how to advocate on behalf of the youths. The project model emphasized systems linkage. Collaboration enabled stakeholders to meet participants' diverse service needs. Bridges staff built partnerships with community providers to optimize service coordination. Benefits counselors and service coordinators completed Community Work Incentive Coordinator training from an SSA contractor to ensure that they understood and could effectively

counsel individuals about SSI and DI work incentives. That knowledge helped build relationships throughout the community, as service providers were particularly interested in meeting with Bridges staff to learn about benefits counseling and how to apply SSA work incentive rules.

SSA participated in Bridges meetings. SSA's Area Work Incentive Coordinator answered technical and operational questions from Bridges staff. SSA field office personnel reported that Bridges staff knew the SSI and DI program rules, and that project participants showed more confidence, independence, and knowledge of SSI rules than they had in earlier contacts.

MYTI

MYTI relied on teachers to deliver services because schools are the institutions most responsible for working with youths aged 4–22 with disabilities. MYTI's use of school-based interventions minimized intrusions into students' and their families' time.

MYTI was divided into four phases in order to vary the focus of its services according to the age range of participants. For each phase, specific transition services helped participants prepare for or obtain employment.

- **Phase I** served participants aged 10–13. Teachers helped students with life portfolios and future plans, and referred students for benefits analysis and advice.
- **Phase II** served participants aged 14–18. Teachers helped students to develop employment and other plans, and referred students for benefits analysis and advice.
- **Phase III** served participants aged 19–21. Teachers and MYTI staff helped students to develop vocational profiles and create customized employment plans (including a budget for needed job supports). Staff also developed an initial benefits analysis and work incentives plan with the student, and arranged a One Stop Center visit.
- **Phase IV** served participants aged 22–25. MYTI staff continued to provide Phase I–III services as needed to youths who had exited school.

Each phase involved developing an individualized plan for targeted employment. In Phase I, participants developed a vision of future work and a vocational plan. In Phases II–IV, participants designed a plan to prepare for or obtain employment (or self-employment). The plan described needed services

and supports. It also identified desired employment outcomes that emerged from the discovery process, which explored the student's interests, preferred conditions of employment, and potential workplace contributions. The tasks that a student could offer an employer became the basis for customizing a potential job. Customized employment planning enabled MYTI staff to identify potential employers by matching the student's interests with the tasks required by the employer. MYTI staff also apprised participants of affiliated services from sources such as local One Stop Centers and assisted them in using such supports.

In Phase II, the student, family, and teacher shared in deciding which work preparation activities to pursue. In Phase III, the student devised a budget to identify supports, services, and expenses necessary to prepare for employment, as well as potential funding sources to help manage the costs. MDRS approved modest funding for participants' self-directed efforts to obtain uniforms, state picture identification cards, and birth certificates; develop visual, vocational, and representational profiles or portfolios; procure job development and coaching services; pay certain transportation, medical screening, and tuition costs; and purchase small business start-up supplies. Student budgets emphasized the shared role of government and personal resources.

In the fourth year of the project, MYTI participants enrolled in a program in which IDAs provided a savings incentive comprising a \$4-for-\$1 match (up to a maximum of \$1,000) for personal savings dedicated to funding postsecondary education, self-employment, or a first-time home. Although MDRS administered the program, it included private-sector partners.

Statistics

In this section, we present statistics on the characteristics of the youth served by Bridges and MYTI and on the services provided by the projects. We also present statistics on earnings and SSI and DI program participation for up to 5 years after the youths enrolled in the projects.

Bridges

Although Bridges served over 500 youths from 2003 through 2009, only 495 of them had verifiable Social Security Numbers (SSNs).¹⁰ Table 2 presents client characteristics. Bridges served more males than females (56 percent versus 44 percent). About

20 percent of the youths reported an intellectual disability as their primary disability; however, not all youths have a disability listed in SSA records. Most of the youths who consented to be in the program were aged 18 or older at enrollment.¹¹ When they first entered the Bridges program, most youths were in school (80 percent); by the time they exited Bridges, half of the youths were out of school (not shown).

Youths participating in Bridges received a variety of services, as shown in the tabulation below. Among the 81 percent of youths who received any of the 11 specific services identified in the data, the most common was job training (78 percent), followed by pre-vocational training (70 percent), living skills training (69 percent), and job placement services (59 percent). However, many youths received other services, ranging from legal aid (2 percent) to on-the-job support (47 percent).

Type of service	Clients served (%)
Any	80.6
Job training	78.3
Prevocational training	69.8
Living skills training	69.0
Job placement	58.5
On-the-job support or extra training	47.1
Testing or evaluation	46.3
Financial assistance	31.0
Health services	26.1
Counseling or therapy	23.9
Mental health services	16.3
Legal or advocacy services	2.0

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on Social Security administrative record extracts and Bridges management files.

The majority of Bridges youth received either SSI payments (55 percent) or DI benefits (3 percent) at the time of enrollment (Table 3). Five years after enrollment, 70 percent of Bridges participants received SSI payments and 30 percent received DI benefits (18 percent received concurrent benefits). The increase in SSI receipt is common after age 18, when SSA treats parental income differently in determining countable income. Much of the increase in DI benefits resulted from youths becoming eligible for benefits on their own record as workers; two-thirds of those receiving DI did so as a worker. Although individuals younger than 31 have lower earnings requirements to qualify for DI worker benefits, this finding still demonstrates a positive step into the workforce for youths who otherwise would not have promising employment prospects.

Table 2.
Demographic characteristics of Bridges and MYTI participants

Characteristic	Bridges		MYTI	
	Percentage distribution	Standard error	Percentage distribution	Standard error
Sex				
Male	55.8	2.2	61.4	3.6
Female	44.2	2.2	38.6	3.6
Diagnosis				
Intellectual disabilities	20.2	1.8	26.6	3.3
Other mental disorders	12.7	1.5	12	2.4
Nervous system	5.7	1.0	9.2	2.1
Musculoskeletal system	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
Other ^a	16.2	1.7	17.9	2.8
Not identified on SSA records ^b	45.1	2.2	34.2	3.5
Age at enrollment				
15 or younger	8.5	1.3	47.8	3.7
16	8.9	1.3	9.2	2.1
17	15.2	1.6	14.7	2.6
18 or older	67.5	2.1	28.3	3.3
Number of participants	495		184	

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on YTD project administrative records.

NOTE: Rounded components of percentage distributions do not necessarily sum to 100.

a. None of the other diagnoses comprised more than 6 percent of the sample.

b. The percentage with no disability is not the same as the percentage who were not receiving SSI or DI (Table 4), because some youths received DI as a dependent and thus would not have a disability listed in Social Security administrative records.

Table 3.
Percent of YTD clients receiving SSI payments or DI benefits at time of enrollment and 5 years later

Project, program type, and status	Month of enrollment		Five years after enrollment	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Bridges				
SSI	54.9	2.2	70.3	2.4
DI	3.2	0.8	29.7	2.4
DI worker	1.0	0.4	20.0	2.1
DI child	2.2	0.7	9.7	1.6
Either SSI or DI	55.8	2.2	82.2	2.0
Both SSI and DI	2.4	0.7	17.8	2.0
Deceased	0.8	0.5
Number	495		360	
MYTI				
SSI	65.8	3.5	62.8	5.5
DI	10.3	2.2	24.4	4.9
DI worker	0.0	0.0	11.5	3.6
DI child	10.3	2.2	12.8	3.8
Either SSI or DI	68.5	3.4	71.8	5.1
Both SSI and DI	7.6	2.0	15.4	4.1
Deceased	5.1	2.5
Number	184		78	

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on Social Security administrative record extracts.

NOTE: ... = not applicable.

About 60 percent of participants had earnings in the years following their enrollment in Bridges (Table 4). The earnings rate peaked in the first year of participation (69 percent) then dropped in succeeding years because of staggered enrollment. This earnings pattern was not unexpected, given the participants' age range and the timing of program services. Five years after enrollment, almost one-half (44 percent) of clients earned at least \$1,020.¹² Among those youths, average earnings 5 years after enrollment were over \$9,300.

Among participants who received SSI or DI benefits, 56 percent reported earnings to SSA while enrolled in Bridges (Table 5). Additionally, 58 percent used SSA's work incentives or the YTD waivers. The number of clients using the work incentives could exceed that of clients reporting earnings because not all work incentives required actual work. Of all work incentives and waivers, the general earned income exclusion (GEIE) waiver was the most commonly used (39 percent), although a combined 42 percent used the student earned income exclusion (SEIE),

either as the standard incentive (26 percent) or the YTD waiver (16 percent).

MYTI

MYTI originally proposed to serve 319 students, but the goal was adjusted after Hurricane Katrina hit the project area in August 2005; ultimately, MYTI served 184 youths with verified SSNs. MYTI served more males than females (Table 2), 61 percent versus 39 percent.

Participating schools were to provide transition services that included exposure to work experiences for special-education students. MYTI's objectives included enabling participants to reach short-term outcomes such as high school completion or enrollment in postsecondary education. Some students pursued a Mississippi "occupational diploma," which has employment requirements. Over the course of the project, 61 participants received a certificate of completion,¹³ 20 received an occupational diploma; 3 pursued a general equivalency diploma (GED), which 2 had attained by the time we compiled our data; and 2 obtained certified nursing assistant certificates (not shown).

Table 4.
Clients with earnings, by project and years before or after enrollment

Project and years before or after enrollment	Clients with any earnings					Clients with earnings of \$1,020 or more				
	Number	Percent	Standard error	Mean earnings ^a	Standard error	Number	Percent	Standard error	Mean earnings ^a	Standard error
Bridges										
-2	495	32.3	2.1	741	102	71	14.3	1.6	4,667	506
-1	495	43.6	2.2	1,063	114	101	20.4	1.8	4,782	375
0	495	60.4	2.2	1,561	128	158	31.9	2.1	4,500	282
1	494	69.2	2.1	2,247	185	170	34.4	2.1	6,183	385
2	494	65.4	2.1	2,440	214	171	34.6	2.1	6,769	462
3	423	57.0	2.4	3,029	251	169	40.0	2.4	7,383	455
4	357	60.8	2.6	1,658	253	57	16.0	1.9	10,064	1,018
5	248	58.5	3.1	4,127	413	108	43.5	3.2	9,358	670
MYTI										
-2	184	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
-1	184	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
0	184	15.2	2.7	216	76	10	5.4	1.7	3,236	1,023
1	184	23.4	3.1	441	160	16	8.7	2.1	4,747	1,495
2	184	26.1	3.2	746	176	26	14.1	2.6	5,129	841
3	132	19.7	3.5	555	141	16	12.1	2.9	4,212	635
4	77	28.6	5.2	786	393	b	b	b	b	b
5	36	30.6	7.8	664	260	b	b	b	b	b

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on Social Security administrative record extracts.

NOTE: The \$1,020 threshold represents the sum of earnings an individual can earn in a year, applying both the general (\$20) and earned (\$65) income exclusions, that can be disregarded from countable income under SSI program rules.

a. In 2010 dollars.

b. Suppressed because of small sample size (less than 2 percent of sample; fewer than 10 individuals).

Table 5.
YTD client use of SSA work incentives and waivers (in percent)

Incentive	Bridges	MYTI
Positive earnings (reported to SSA)	56.1	30.0
Any SSA work incentive or YTD waiver	57.8	38.8
SEIE (standard incentive)	25.7	15.0
SEIE (YTD waiver)	16.2	3.8
IDA	0.3	20.0
GEIE waiver	39.4	21.3
PASS (standard incentive)	2.2	0.0
PASS (YTD waiver)	30.0	0.0
Continuing Disability Review/Age-18 redetermination (Section 301)	2.2	8.8

SOURCE: Martinez and others (2010).

NOTES: The sample sizes are 358 for Bridges and 80 for MYTI. Because these samples comprise only SSI recipients and DI beneficiaries in 2003–2008, they differ from those in the article's other tables.

PASS = plan to achieve self-support.

MYTI staff helped youths obtain employment experiences as they moved through the project's four service phases. Overall, 27 percent of youths completed Phase I, as shown in the tabulation below; however, the majority of youths were served in Phase II (63 percent). About 20 percent of the youths were served in each of Phases III and IV.

MYTI phase	Clients served (%)
Phase I: ages 10–13	26.7
Phase II: ages 14–18	63.0
Phase III: ages 19–21 ^a	19.4
Phase IV: ages 22–25 ^a	20.0

SOURCE: MYTI management files.

NOTE: Youths advanced their career development by going to the next phase at the appropriate age. Because youths are counted in each phase of the project in which they participated, percentages sum to more than 100.

a. Phases II and IV represent community-based transition services.

The percentage of youths served by MYTI who were SSI or DI recipients was higher than that for Bridges (Table 3). At the time of enrollment, over 68 percent of MYTI participants received either SSI or DI. The majority of these youths (66 percent) received SSI, 10 percent received DI, and 8 percent received both. Twelve percent were receiving DI benefits on their own record as workers at the end of the project.

MYTI youths were less likely than Bridges clients to have positive earnings after enrollment (Table 4). In the year of enrollment, 15 percent of MYTI youths had earnings; after 5 years, 31 percent had earnings. Few

youths earned more than \$1,020 in any year, which is not surprising given that MYTI participants were generally younger than Bridges participants; however, among those who earned more than \$1,020 three years after enrollment, average earnings exceeded \$4,200.

As the first project to establish IDAs, MYTI provided a model for incorporating IDAs into other YTD projects (Martinez and others 2008). Twenty percent of MYTI youth receiving SSI or DI benefits enrolled in an IDA to either buy a home or start a business (Table 5). Participants with an IDA deposited their earnings in a savings account, met with a benefits counselor, and attended financial literacy classes. Overall, 39 percent of MYTI youths who were SSI recipients or DI beneficiaries used a work incentive or waiver between 2003 and 2008. The most commonly used was the GEIE waiver (21 percent), followed closely by IDAs.

Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate how Bridges and MYTI each helped one of their YTD participants achieve educational and employment outcomes, reducing reliance on disability benefits. Although all local sites within each project had successful participants, the highlighted youths come from the Whittier, California and Jackson County, Mississippi sites. Their names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Bridges

Roberto, who has cerebral palsy, enrolled in Bridges at age 24. A recent high school graduate, Roberto came to the Whittier Union High School District's

Employment Network (EN) because, as an SSI recipient, he had received a Ticket under the Ticket-to-Work program and hoped the EN could help him find a job.¹⁴ Ultimately, the EN staff determined he was a good candidate for the Bridges project. Bridges staff met with Roberto and his family to identify his interests and the skills he could bring to a job. During a person-centered planning session, Roberto suggested seeking a job that would use his computer, organizational, and communication skills. To assist him, Bridges provided benefits counseling, job development and placement services, and intensive service coordination.

Bridges staff helped Roberto find a job as a customer service representative at a closet design company. His duties include receiving phone calls from customers who wish to place an order or schedule a renovation. Bridges staff explained to Roberto how earnings would affect his benefits and how to report wages to SSA. While he participated in Bridges, Roberto used the \$3-for-\$4 GEIE waiver to substantially reduce his countable earnings. He also attended a local community college where he took general education, computer science, and other courses.

Roberto continued receiving benefits counseling and employment services from Bridges staff after exiting the YTD program by assigning his Ticket to Bridges as his EN. He identified a teleservice center position at SSA as his employment goal in a follow-up person-centered planning session.

MYTI

Isabella, who has an intellectual disability, enrolled in MYTI at age 19. In a vocational class at her Jackson County high school, she exhibited strong interest and aptitude in industrial arts. Isabella developed a love for woodworking from industrial arts class and working after school in her uncle's workshop, where she helped him sand, stain, repair, and refinish cabinets. Her teacher and transition specialist met with Isabella and her family to develop customized employment opportunities that matched her interests and abilities. During a planning meeting, Isabella expressed interest in finding full-time work that involved tasks in woodworking or the building trades. In class and at her uncle's cabinet shop, she displayed cooperative work habits, a willingness to learn new tasks, dependability, punctuality, teamwork, and ability to follow rules.

MYTI's transition specialist presented Isabella's portfolio to a lumber and supply company that employed over 500 workers. She was hired for

full-time work with benefits, and an experienced coworker trained her. In the first year of employment, MYTI staff assisted her in learning new job tasks, and helped her to complete continuing education courses and general activities at the community college. As a full-time student younger than 22, Isabella used the standard SEIE incentive to exclude her earnings from countable income. In addition, while enrolled in MYTI, Isabella used the GEIE \$3-for-\$4 waiver once her earnings exceeded the SEIE exclusion maximum; doing so substantially reduced her countable earnings.

With help from MYTI's benefits specialist, Isabella opened an IDA to save toward purchasing a home and began attending financial literacy classes. In addition, Isabella regularly talked with the benefits specialist about her finances. They discussed work incentives, YTD waivers, and monthly wage reporting. The benefits specialist also taught Isabella how to keep track of her paystubs and SSI payments. Because of her increase in earnings, her SSI payments stopped. Isabella achieved her goal of full-time employment.

Sustainability

Both projects continued to implement some aspects of their services after YTD funding ended. In this section we highlight select activities in each project that demonstrate the longer-term system changes made possible by YTD.

Bridges

SSA funding for Bridges as a YTD project ended in 2008.¹⁵ Since then, Bridges has sought other funding to continue providing project services. Staff identified several potential resources and applied for multiple grants to ensure continued service. Several sites have also become private nonprofit agencies to increase the scope of grants for which they can compete. Their efforts have included participation in the 2009 American Recovery & Reinvestment Act's Summer Youth Employment Program in partnership with the local Workforce Investment Boards.

The Bridges YTD experience encouraged seven school districts in California to become ENs in the Ticket to Work program. The ENs can serve clients aged 18 and older. The EN income enables the sites to sustain the additional activities without YTD funds from SSA. For example, Career Connection, a part of the Whittier Union High School District, has been an EN since 2003. Since Bridges services ended, 22 YTD youths have assigned their Tickets to Career

Connection for additional employment supports at their former high school, enabling service continuity and uninterrupted partnerships with educators.

The Whittier Union High School District and a consortium comprising three other school districts have received Projects with Industry¹⁶ grants to continue to provide some services to Bridges participants. The consortium districts have also received US Department of Transportation grants to provide transportation options in rural areas and at nontraditional public transportation hours. Each of the sites has also been able to expand its Transition Partnership Project to include benefits advice and service coordination for youths with mental health conditions.

MYTI

The MYTI project sought to identify post-YTD services to be sustained and to build skills related to employability. The local school districts adopted many of the interventions implemented in the project, such as the use of transition phases and customized employment strategies. Although the school districts and MDRS no longer have SSA funding, they still offer those services in different ways: Each MYTI staff member was either retained to provide ongoing project services within an agency or school, or was hired for other positions that would offer similar services.

Although other schools are using MYTI services, it has not yet been determined if they are including them in their performance standards. In conjunction with the University of Southern Mississippi, the Jackson County School District hosted a conference to share its transition services with approximately 20 other schools, mostly in Mississippi, but also from Kentucky and Florida.

In MYTI's last year, the Jackson County School District created a team of five transition specialists to provide MYTI-style services for both the school district and the vocational rehabilitation transition program. Transition team members were assigned to four geographic areas of the county; one person visited each high school while two of the transition specialists provided services in a MYTI-established "community classroom." After MYTI concluded, these services continued at local school districts and MDRS offices in a program jointly funded by MDRS and the state education department.

Local Workforce Investment Network (WIN) job centers offered youths a set of activities during teacher-led tours of the centers. Both the Pascagoula

and Gulfport centers welcomed students during the years MYTI operated. This connection will continue while teachers have the funds to offer field trips for their students; however, job center usage will vary by school district. Mentoring, established in MYTI's final year in Jackson County, has been included in students' school plans, and availability has expanded to include students at risk of dropping out. At the superintendent's request, peer mentoring has continued in Jackson County using guidelines established under MYTI. The Harrison County School District also developed a mentoring program while participating in MYTI and has continued some form of mentoring through a new program in targeted schools that connects students with caring adults or peers.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Bridges and MYTI projects implemented enhanced transition services and used YTD waivers of SSA program rules to help youths achieve education and employment goals. From December 2003 to September 2009, Bridges and MYTI staff provided youths with (1) the support to find and keep a job; (2) information on employment's effects on Social Security benefits; and (3) first steps toward building the capacity for long-term competitive employment.

Bridges staff directly provided over 80 percent of the youth participants with employment services, service coordination, and benefits counseling. After 5 years, almost 60 percent of Bridges participants had earnings. MYTI served younger clients with more significant disabilities; 39 percent received community-based transition services (Phase III and IV) and 31 percent had earnings after 5 years.

Although the statistics reflect many successes, the projects were too short to yield long-term findings. The short-term accomplishments of Bridges and MYTI youths may lead them, perhaps many years later, to leave (or never enroll in) SSI or DI. SSA plans to follow YTD participants for longer periods to detect any lasting impacts on SSI or DI receipt and earnings. Over the next several years, SSA intends to publish reports on short- and long-term impacts.

To date, Bridges and MYTI have offered several lessons on successful service implementation. One lesson is that strong partnerships are instrumental in successfully serving youth in transition. The Bridges and MYTI projects built upon existing transition programs to demonstrate how a variety of services from multiple partners can effectively coalesce. Another lesson is

that intervention components should be clearly defined and linked to measurable outcomes, which should be monitored to ensure a consistent focus on program goals. At the outset of the Bridges and MYTI projects, staff used a management information system to record the demographics, services provided, and action plans for each youth; this system allowed staff to identify accomplishments incrementally. A third lesson is that support services (such as case management, benefits counseling, and self-determination) provided in conjunction with employment services can produce successful employment outcomes. Benefits counseling enabled MYTI participants to learn about the IDA and then, while in high school, use the IDA and attain financial literacy. In this regard, the YTD has confirmed how beneficial asset development accounts can be to low-income individuals.

Lastly, the YTD projects developed and implemented practices to support postsecondary education and employment. Apart from the waivers, which increased the incentives for employment and savings among SSI recipients, Bridges and MYTI created a system that provided direct delivery and service coordination in the school system. Although that change is directly attributable to the Bridges and MYTI projects, and can potentially eliminate a significant barrier to work for many young SSI recipients, it does not necessitate a change to SSA policy. By breaking down the silos in which different agencies work, SSA and its community partners in YTD sites were able to substantially change the transition process and dramatically affect beneficiaries' lives.

Although the outcomes reported in this article are not causal, they do suggest that youth with disabilities can enter the workforce and achieve some self-sufficiency. SSA continued the YTD project in six other sites that implemented a random-assignment research design. Youths participating in those sites receive the same waivers and similar services as those in Bridges and MYTI (for more information on those sites, see Fraker and Rangarajan 2009). The final results from those six sites, available in 2014, will provide a deeper context for the Bridges and MYTI results reported here.

Notes

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¹ Most youths are eligible for a variety of education-based disability services until they reach age 22 or receive a high school diploma.

² SSA redetermines SSI eligibility when a child recipient attains age 18. In addition, all recipients are subject to periodic continuing disability reviews to ensure they still meet the disability standards for eligibility.

³ This estimate, although still the best available, is somewhat dated. The diagnosis mix for SSI child recipients has changed since the study was conducted and numerous policy changes, such as establishing age-18 redeterminations, have occurred. It is not clear how these and other changes may have affected average time on the program.

⁴ See Martinez and others (2008) for information on the other YTD sites. We focus on Bridges and MYTI because six of the remaining eight projects used random-assignment designs and will be formally evaluated by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; see Fraker and Rangarajan (2009) for more information on that evaluation. The other two projects terminated before completion.

⁵ SSI is a means-tested cash transfer program for the elderly and for individuals with disabilities. DI is an insurance program for individuals with disabilities and their dependents. SSI and DI use the same definitions of disability for adults: The individual must have a medically determinable disability that is expected to last (or has lasted) at least 12 continuous months or to result in death and prevents him or her from doing any substantial gainful activity. To be eligible for SSI if younger than 18, the individual's disability must result in marked and severe functional limitations (as opposed to preventing substantial gainful activity). To receive DI benefits, an individual must be insured by accumulating a certain level of lifetime earnings called quarters of coverage or be the dependent of someone who has accrued enough quarters or coverage. SSI has no work history requirement.

⁶ Those techniques are used to help youths discover their interests. For example, a youth may create a portfolio with information and images about potential careers and other goals.

⁷ MYTI participants and staff describe their experiences with customized employment at <http://www.dol.gov/dol/media/webcast/20110610-odep-ce/>.

⁸ The benefits counselor was based at a local One Stop Service Center. Such centers were established under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 to provide employers and job seekers with mutual access to workforce services.

⁹ Regional occupational programs are public education programs that provide hands-on career preparation and skill training for particular jobs.

¹⁰ The verification process involved checking the name, date of birth, sex, and SSN reported to the project. Unverified SSNs may still be legitimate, and having one did not disqualify a youth from participating in YTD. However, we excluded youths with unverified SSNs from this study because their SSNs would not match their actual program history or earnings. The youths also had to be enrolled in or after 2003 to be included in these analyses.

¹¹ Although most YTD projects are limited to youths aged 14–25, the earliest projects, such as Bridges, served a broader age range.

¹² The \$1,020 threshold represents the sum of the monthly earnings an individual can earn in a year (applying both the \$20 general and the \$65 earned income exclusions in each of the 12 months) that can be disregarded from countable income under SSI program rules. Although the values relevant to calculating SSI payments can vary from month to month, extracts of earnings data are only available on a yearly basis. So, although this “annualized” amount does not directly correspond to any programmatic value, it provides a useful approximation of earnings received.

¹³ The Mississippi Department of Education issued a special diploma stating that a client successfully completed an individualized education plan.

¹⁴ The Ticket-to-Work program is a free, voluntary program for Social Security and SSI recipients with disabilities. Participants can assign their tickets to one of several types of approved organizations (including ENs) that have agreed with SSA to provide employment services. The EN receives payment from SSA when the beneficiary meets specific employment goals.

¹⁵ Bridges operated under a no-cost extension through September 2009.

¹⁶ Projects with Industry is a US Department of Education program that provides grants for job development, placement, career advancement, and training for individuals with disabilities.

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