



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE TUCSON

Sonoran Center for
Excellence in Disabilities

IHD Conference | June 23, 2025

Customized Employment in Arizona: Pilot, Impact, and What's Next

Presented by

Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation & University of Arizona Sonoran Center For Excellence in Disabilities

This project is funded by the Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation program and is aimed at developing partnerships, creating capacity, and enhancing employment outcomes for Arizonans with the most significant disabilities.

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2021

- Groundwork Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment for VR identified that Customized Employment services were not widely available in Arizona

2022

- The Sonoran Center, under an existing ISA with RSA, remained committed to Employment First
- Leadership changes occurred at the Sonoran Center, opening the door for fresh strategy

2023

- VR engaged national technical assistance partners
- Reviewed CE models from other states
- Found challenges in identifying a model that fit Arizona's systems

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June
2023

- RSA created a new Strategic Initiatives Manager role to bring focused leadership to Customized Employment.

Why it
matters

Arizona built a CE model that reflects our values, systems, and communities — with collaboration at the core.

Dec
2023

- RSA and the Sonoran Center formed a cross-agency Pilot Development Team
- Created:
 - Service specifications
 - Reporting tools
 - Educational materials for providers and VR staff

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Arizona Customized Employment Statement

Rooted in Employment First principles, Customized Employment is an all-inclusive, person-centered service designed to rapidly engage job seekers with significant disabilities, such as Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities, who express a desire to work. It is tailored to individuals who may have little to no work experience or who have encountered repeated challenges in traditional employment settings. It bases other services and assessments on the unique needs of the job seeker, identified through an in-depth *Discovery* process. This service:



- Builds on the job seeker's strengths and interests to create meaningful employment opportunities.
- Designs personalized roles instead of relying on traditional job openings.
- Brings together families, support networks, and employers to ensure the right supports are in place.
- Uses creative and flexible strategies to solve challenges.

Customized Employment shows that it's not about “if” someone can work, but “how” we can help them thrive in the workplace.



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Customized Employment Philosophy



Team Approach



Collaborate on
Planning



Communicate
Often & Clearly



Stay Person-
Centered

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Customized Employment Experience



Individualized
Discovery



Job
Development
Based on the
Person



Mutual Benefit



Ongoing Support

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Traditional Employment

In traditional hiring, the employer defines the job and its requirements—then applicants are expected to fit that mold. The process usually includes submitting a resume, completing an application, and going through a formal interview. This approach often overlooks people whose strengths and potential aren't fully reflected through standard methods.



Customized Employment

Customized Employment flips the script. Instead of starting with a job opening, we start with the person—discovering their strengths, interests, and support needs. Then, we work with employers to create or negotiate a role that fits the individual and meets a real business need. It's not about competing for a job—it's about creating the right fit.

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Getting Started

December 2023

First VR & Sonoran Center
Meeting

January 2024

Planning & Reviewing

February 2024

Groundwork

March / April 2024

Call for Providers

May 2024

Provider Kick Off Meeting



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Pilot Providers



WORKABILITY



ODYSSEY
Services Corporation



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Arizona Customized Employment Training

Customized Employment Values, Discovery
& Person-Centered Planning

Introduction to Job Development &
Marketing

Introduction to Job Coaching & Systematic
Instruction

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Providers began the pilot with a staggered start to:

- Allow the team to learn and make adjustments along the way while
- Ensure each provider received the training and support needed for high-quality implementation

| | | WORKABILITY | ODYSSEY Services Corporation | LA FRONTERA ARIZONA |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Avg Time: 16.5 hours | June 2024 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | July 2024 | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | August 2024 | | | ✓ |

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Implementation Training



In-Person Implementation (for Direct Service Professional)

- Held after each ACE module to reinforce learning with hands-on application
- Focused on practicing skills in Discovery, Job Development, and Systematic Instruction
- Providers shared real experiences, asked questions, and refined their approach
- Created a space for collaborative problem-solving and confidence-building



Leadership & Organizational Training

- Designed specifically for agency leaders, supervisors, and decision-makers
- Focused on understanding the CE model, removing internal barriers, and building systems that support fidelity
- Encouraged leaders to become Champions of Customized Employment within their organization
- Supported alignment between direct service delivery and organizational culture

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Identifying Pilot Job Seekers



VR Client Ready for Job Development

Client must have an open VR case and VRC supported participation in the pilot

Most Significant Disabilities

For pilot, member of the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD)

Long-Term Supports

Enrolled in Arizona Long Term Care System (ALTCS) or another source of extended funding for post-placement support.

Willing to Engage in Customized Employment

Customized Employment takes time—it involves getting to know the job seeker on a personal level. It's not fast, but it's focused on the person.

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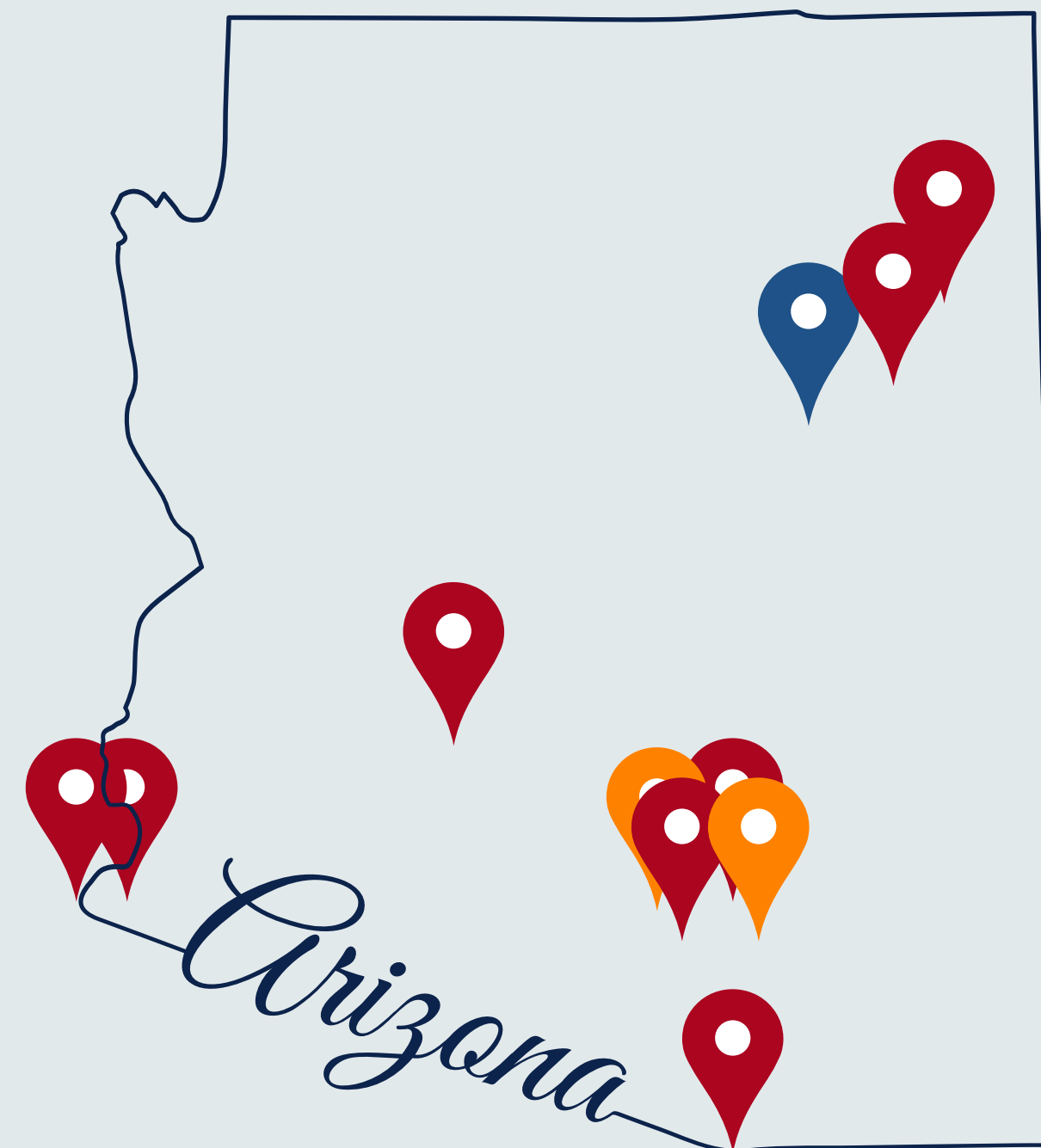
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Identifying Pilot Job Seekers in Arizona

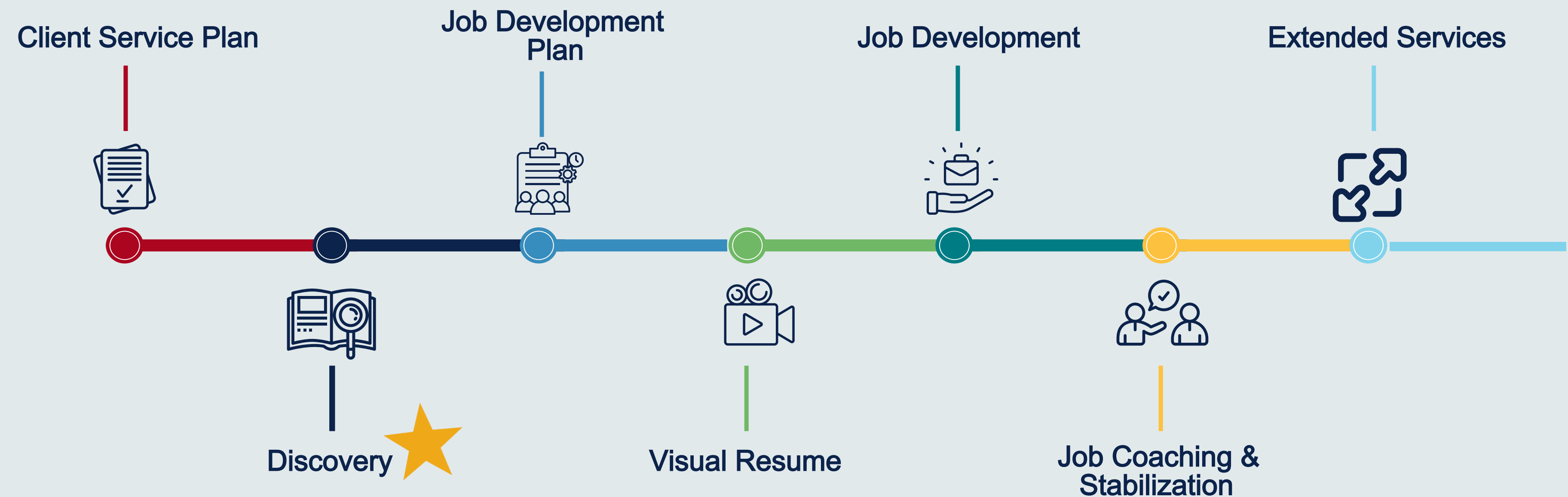


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The Customized Employment Experience





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Training, Tools, Resources & Updates



Services
Specification
with Appendices
& Exhibits



Office Hours &
Collaboration
Networks



Resources &
Tools
(videos,
checklists,
handouts, etc.)



Training &
Technical
Assistance



Monthly
Newsletters &
Updates

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Top 10 Lessons Learned



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- 01 Mindshift Is the Real Work
- 02 Commitment to Interagency
Coordination & Collaboration
- 03 Expanding Providers' Understanding &
Implementation of Customized Employment
- 04 Families Need Education & Support
- 05 Quality Over Speed Leads to Better
Outcomes
- 06 Training Must Be Paired with
Coaching
- 07 Stagger Starts for Continuous Improvement
- 08 The Process Transforms Everyone
Involved
- 09 Discovery Takes Time, Trust & Teamwork
- 10 Tools Are Strong—But Relationships
Drive Results



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Theresa
VR Counselor

*I have learned things I
didn't know about this VR
client, and I've been
working with them since
2019.*

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Ben

DDD Support Coordinator

I really like positive view and encouraging our members to show and share what they CAN DO rather than focusing on what they cannot. They have heard about what they can't do all their lives. This is about focusing on what they can.

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Silvan
Provider

*In customized employment
services, we're not just
communicating with
members & families, we're
building relationships.*

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Penelope

DDD Employment Support
Specialist

What could be better than giving people something that allows them to achieve the fulfilling career they have always wished for and most certainly deserve to have? I believe Customized Employment will be the tool that will give our vendors the ability to help make many of our DDD members' dreams come true.

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Brandy
Provider

*My mind is blown!
What I am learning will help
me support all my clients
better, not just those in the
customized employment
pilot.*

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Coreen
VR Counselor

I slowed down and focused on my VR client's ideas and struggles. It is teaching me to look through a different lens on how they see themselves, how they see me as a counselor & how they see their life.

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Policy & System-Level Impact

Need for Clearer Definitions

Many professionals still confuse Customized Employment with Supported Employment. Continued training and consistent messaging are essential.

2.

Importance of Interagency Collaboration

Coordination between VR, Tribal VR, DDD, ALTCS, and other partners is critical. Success depends on systems planning together—not in silos.

3.

Best Practices Requires Support

Providers need more than training—they need coaching and structured time to reflect and grow in the Customized Employment model.

4.

Extended Supports Must Be Identified Early

Planning for long-term support through DDD or ALTCS must happen alongside job development, not after.

5.

Data and Feedback Loops Are Key

Regular feedback from providers, VR staff, DDD, and families help guide real-time adjustments and strengthen implementation.

6.

Policy Drives Practice

Systems must align funding, timelines, and expectations with the principles of Customized Employment.

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What's Next?

We keep working.

The path to meaningful employment takes time and intention.

We move at the speed of trust.

Relationships—not checklists—drive successful outcomes.

We scale with care.

Our goal is to grow this service while protecting its purpose and fidelity.

We keep listening.

Job seekers, families, and providers are our best guides for what's working—and what needs to change.

We focus on quality, not speed.

A thoughtful match creates longer-term stability and satisfaction.

We keep being flexible.

Customized Employment is not a formula. It requires adaptability, creativity, and patience.

We stay grounded in the person.

Every decision should center the job seeker's strengths, preferences, and potential.

“This is about building a future where everyone is seen as employable and valuable.”

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Change Starts With Us



**This is more than
a service —It's a
Mindset**

Customized Employment
challenges the
traditional view of work
and readiness.



**We Must Believe
in Employment
First**

The work begins by
expecting employment
is possible for everyone,
then committing to
figure out how.



**Shift from
'Program - First'
to 'Person - First'**

Our systems often lead
with services.
Customized Employment
invites us to lead with
people and
relationships.



**Change Happens
Through
Practice**

The more we practice
individualized planning,
deep listening, and
creative job
development, the more
change becomes our
culture.



**Everyone Has a
Role**

VR&DDD staff, schools,
providers, families, and
employers all shape
what employment looks
like for people with
disabilities. Let's shape
it with intention.

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“What sparked something for you today?”

- Let’s hear your questions, thoughts, or reactions.
- How might this approach fit in your work?
- What might need to shift in your role or system to support Customized Employment?



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Thank you

— for joining us today



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<https://bit.ly/cepilot>

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