

Customized Employment Pilot

A collaboration between the Arizona Department of Economic Security's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities.



JANUARY 1 - JUNE 30, 2025

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
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**Sonoran Center for
Excellence in Disabilities**

Introduction

Now halfway through 2025, the Customized Employment Pilot continues to demonstrate promising and practical pathways toward competitive integrated employment for Arizonans with significant disabilities. Building on the foundation laid in 2024, the first six months of 2025 focused on refining implementation, increasing system coordination, and preparing for statewide scalability.

This period has been marked by intentional pivots and thoughtful adjustments, from tool refinement and onboarding improvements to provider transitions and deeper behavioral health alignment. These changes weren't just reactive; they were strategic, reflecting our commitment to making this pilot truly Arizona-specific.

As CRPs moved from CSP to Discovery, tools were refined, feedback was integrated, and new strategies were developed to navigate transitions and ensure sustainability. Importantly, the pilot continues to center the voices of job seekers, even those who choose to pause or step away and reminding us that flexibility and trust are essential in this deeply personal and innovative process.

This pilot remains a true partnership, with Vocational Rehabilitation leading boldly and the Sonoran Center facilitating training, technical assistance, and data collection. Together with providers, VR staff, and system partners, we are co-creating a sustainable model rooted in best practices and Arizona-specific solutions.

Key Phases & Achievements

PHASE 3

Implementation & Service Delivery
Jan 2025 - June 2025

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Ongoing Discovery services occurred, including community observations, home visits, and situational experiences
- Developed a system for soft handoffs between VR and CRPs to support communication during each phase
- One VR client reached Discovery Part III, completing the Person-Centered Employment Plan (PCEP) and preparing for Job Development
- Delivered 8-hour in-person implementation training to three (3) CRP organizations to align expectations and build capacity
- Conducted in-person site visits and training sessions with provider teams in Yuma, Holbrook, Bird Springs, Chandler, and Tucson in March
- Created Discovery Phase I, II, and III CRP Checklists to guide providers through each step
- Adjusted approach for behavioral health pilot clients, working with VR, BH providers, and AHCCCS Employment Administrator to transition to a new provider and preserve continuity of services
- Learned from a Holbrook job seeker who discontinued participation, prompting the development of an onboarding video to better orient future job seekers
- Identified a new job seeker from Navajo Nation to participate in the pilot
- Piloted Discovery activities with job seekers from tribal and rural communities, ensuring culturally responsive implementation
- Created guidance and talking points for VR counselors on how to explain the Customized Employment Experience to families and guardians
- Clarified roles and expectations for providers and VR throughout the Discovery process using implementation tools and visual workflows

Key Phases & Achievements

PHASE 4

Data Collection & Evaluation
Jan 2025 - June 2025

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Launched the Customized Employment Experience Pilot Network, creating monthly virtual gatherings for CRPs and VR staff participating in the pilot
- Hosted monthly Office Hours for direct service providers and state agencies to receive technical assistance, share implementation updates, and problem-solve in real time
- Created and distributed a VR Counselor Desk Aid with clear phase-by-phase examples of how VRCs support Customized Employment based on feedback from VRCs
- Collected insights from provider and VR feedback to refine Discovery tools and streamline documentation
- Presented pilot progress to multiple stakeholders, including:
 - DDD Circle of Support (300 Support Coordinators)
 - Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC)
 - Northern Arizona Community of Practice on Transition (NCoPT)
 - National Customized Employment Community of Practice
 - IHD conference
- Initiated informal evaluation of provider experience using interviews, observations, and form completion feedback
- Identified themes around provider transformation, leading to future development of capacity-building support tools
- Created quotes for use in presentations, future videos, and impact storytelling
- Documented the impact of a person-centered approach on staff mindset shifts and expectations

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT PILOT

BY THE NUMBERS

JAN 1 - JUNE 30, 2025

Customized
Employment
Office Hours
Held

12

Pilot Network
Meetings
Facilitated &
Monthly
Newsletters

6

3

**Tribal VR
clients**

1-Pascua Yaqui
2-Navajo Nation

**VR Clients participating in
Customized Employment
pilot**

9

6

**Pilot
Regions**

Nogales, Tucson,
Yuma, Chandler, Bird
Springs, & Ft.
Defiance

VR client
exited pilot

1

4

**VR clients
completed
Discovery Part 1**

6 PRESENTATIONS

sharing about the Customized Employment
Pilot to ADDPC, DDD, NCoPT, National
Customized Employment CoP, IHD
conference, & Region 2 leadership

5

**New VR
clients
joined
pilot**

13

**New
Resources**

2

**Sonoran Staff
leading the pilot**

3

**New Appendix
and Exhibits
created**

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE

PILOT TIMELINE
AS OF JUNE 30, 2025



REFERRED

**41
days**

This reflects the time from when the VR client is referred to the CRP to when the Client Service Plan is completed based on 5 VR clients.



CLIENT SERVICE PLAN

This reflects the time it takes after the planning meeting for the CRP to complete Discovery Part 1 based on 4 VR clients.

**108
days**



DISCOVERY PART 1

**99
days**

This reflects the time it takes to complete Discovery Part 1 based on 1 VR client.

What Are We Learning from the Pilot Timeline?

1 Referral to CSP: 41 days

- **What it tells us:** There's moderate efficiency in getting from referral to planning. CRPs and VR are coordinating early, which shows promise.
- **Why it matters:** A solid start sets the tone. But 41 days may still feel like a delay to families or VR clients eager to begin, especially if expectations weren't clearly set up front.
- **Opportunity:** Streamline authorization and referral processes to move this closer to a 2–3 week average.

2 CSP to Completion of Discovery Part 1: 108 Days

- **What it tells us:** Discovery takes time, and it should. This phase is about getting to know the person deeply. But 108 days (over 3.5 months) could reflect challenges with staff capacity, scheduling observations, or completing documentation.
- **Why it matters:** If this timeline stretches too long, motivation may drop for the VR client or family.
- **Opportunity:** Provide technical assistance around pacing and project management during Discovery. Reinforce that not all Discovery activities must be sequential.

3 Discovery Part 1 to Completion of Part 2: 99 Days

- **What it tells us:** The transition between Discovery parts may lack urgency or clarity. While Discovery Part II includes more community and work-based activities, nearly 100 days suggests there may be delays in planning, transportation, or staff availability.
- **Why it matters:** Part II is critical for confirming interests and strengths in real environments. Long delays here may disconnect clients from their original goals or energy.
- **Opportunity:** Provide clearer timelines and progress tracking tools for DESPs.

Challenges & Responses

CHALLENGE

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROVIDER UNABLE TO IMPLEMENT CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT WITHIN EXISTING SYSTEMS

The BH provider's existing service model and funding structure could not support the flexibility required for Discovery and Customized Job Development.

RESPONSE

Held collaborative discussions with BH providers and ACCCHS Employment Administrator to assess fit. Made the decision to pivot transitioned clients to another pilot provider, preserving continuity and honoring client choice.

CHALLENGE

CHANGES IN LEAD ROLE MID-PILOT

A leadership role transition during the pilot raised concerns about continuity, team coordination, and maintaining momentum during a critical phase of implementation.

RESPONSE

Hired an additional co-lead to provide consistent support & implementation oversight. Advocated for a flexible work structure, including remote options to retain talent, ensure accessibility, and promote long-term sustainability of project leadership.

Challenges & Responses

CHALLENGE

STAFF TURNOVER WITHIN CRPS

Staffing changes in Yuma, as well as transitions involving behavioral health VR clients, created disruptions in service continuity. In some cases, new staff had limited experience with Customized Employment and required onboarding mid-implementation.

RESPONSE

Coordinated services through transition meetings and provided hands-on implementation mentorship with CRP leadership. Focused on embedding Customized Employment within a provider's systems while supporting the onboarding of new staff to ensure alignment and continuity.

CHALLENGE

NEED FOR CONSISTENT TOOLS

To scale Customized Employment statewide, CRPs must be equipped with accessible tools that promote consistency without sacrificing person-centeredness.

RESPONSE

Developed comprehensive checklists for Discovery Part I–III checklists for CRPs to clarify expectations, support implementation fidelity, and help onboard new staff.

Challenges & Responses

CHALLENGE

LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT PROCESS

As a new service in Arizona, many VR counselors are unfamiliar with the phases, expectations, and how it differs from traditional job development.

RESPONSE

Developed and distributed a VR Counselor Desk Aid and shared visual workflows to explain the Customized Employment Experience. Office Hours, Network meetings, and targeted TA were used to reinforce learning and build confidence among staff.

CHALLENGE

A JOB SEEKER EXITED THE PILOT MID-PROCESS

One job seeker chose to discontinue participation after Discovery Part I, citing unclear expectations and discomfort with the personal process.

RESPONSE

Used this as a learning opportunity to create a visual orientation video for future job seekers & their families to better understand the CE experience and timeline upfront.

Deliverables

click picture
to access
deliverable

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT WEBPAGE

Created a centralized platform for resources, updates, and educational materials to support pilot efforts.



SERVICES SPECIFICATION WITH APPENDICES & EXHIBITS

Finished the appendices and exhibits for the pilot creating the monthly progress report and closure report.



TRAINING TOOLS

Training tools were developed and refined throughout the pilot to support CRP staff and VR counselors.



MONTHLY NEWSLETTERS

This deliverables document lists the Newsletter updates under “Newsletters” & were sent to VR staff to share pilot updates, celebrate successes, and highlight tools and strategies being used across the state.



IHD PRESENTATION

This presentation represents the most current summary of pilot outcomes, lessons learned, and system-level insights.



Next Steps

1

Quarterly invoicing & Reporting

The pilot will shift to quarterly invoicing and reporting to streamline administrative processes and align with VR process.

2

Jessica Winchester, Co-Lead

Jessica will deepen her role by embedding herself within the implementation process, building trusted relationships with CRPs, VRCs, and pilot participants across the state.

3

On-demand Trainings

The team will continue development of Arizona-specific on-demand training modules to support scalable, high-quality implementation of Customized Employment practices.

4

Evaluate Network & Office Hours

The efficacy of the Pilot Network and monthly Office Hours will be evaluated to ensure they are meeting provider needs and promoting meaningful learning.

5

Update Reporting Documents

Reporting tools and documents will be refined and updated based on provider feedback and real-time implementation data to better support clarity and consistency.

6

Pilot Implementation

CRPs will continue the progressive implementation of the Customized Employment Experience for all job seekers enrolled in the pilot, moving toward Job Development and Placement phases.

7

Increase Data Collection

The evaluation team will increase data collection, interviews, and feedback loops to gain a deeper understanding of what is working, what needs to shift, and how the pilot is experienced by all stakeholders.

8

Include Mohave County

Special attention will be given to Mohave County, ensuring that the perspectives, challenges, and opportunities unique to that region are heard, understood, and reflected in future planning.

Wrap Up



Joining the Sonoran Center and stepping into the role of the Employment First Program Manager has been nothing short of inspiring. Over the past several months, I've had the opportunity of listening, learning, and witnessing the incredible dedication of our providers, partners, and individuals pursuing meaningful work through Customized Employment.

This pilot is more than a program, it's a growing community rooted in possibility, shared learning, and the belief that everyone has something valuable to contribute.

From Vocational Rehabilitation and DDD to Tribal VR, providers, families, and job seekers themselves, we are co-creating a new way forward.

It's one that centers people, honors lived experience, and challenges traditional assumptions about employment.

What excites me most is how this pilot has created space for collaboration. Providers are taking bold steps to rethink how they support people. Systems partners are asking the right questions and aligning efforts. And job seekers are being seen in new ways: as individuals with strengths, dreams, and untapped potential.

This is what systems change looks like, not just policy shifts, but a cultural shift powered by relationships, trust, and a shared commitment to doing better. I'm honored to be part of this effort and this community.

So glad to be here, and even more excited for what we're building together.

Jessica Winchester,
Employment First Program Manager



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