

# Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

## Virtual Community Conversations as Catalysts for Improving Transitions for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities --Manuscript Draft--

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### **Virtual Community Conversations as Catalysts for Improving Transitions for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

The transition from high school to adulthood can cultivate a mix of emotions for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Youth with IDD aspire to participate in a variety of activities after high school, such as attaining paid employment, enrolling in postsecondary education, being involved in their communities, living independently, and building friendships (Lipscomb et al., 2017). However, this stage of life also introduces a great deal of uncertainty for youth with IDD due to the longstanding barriers associated with achieving these aspirations (Mazzotti et al., 2021). Youth with IDD and their families often struggle to navigate the complicated network of services and programs needed in adulthood (Gilson et al., 2017). Likewise, schools, agencies, and other community programs wrestle with how best to partner with one another to ensure seamless transitions (Carter et al., 2021). Finally, the mindsets of local community members must reflect high expectations for inclusion so that youth with IDD can thrive in all aspects of community life (Bumble & Carter, 2021). Supporting successful transitions is a complex endeavor, but it is critical to ensuring every youth with IDD can flourish in adulthood.

Accessing local transition-related supports is an enduring challenge for youth and their families (Laxman et al., 2019). For example, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) policies indicate that youth with IDD should be able to access supported employment, workplace readiness training, career counseling, and other employment-related transition supports while they are still in high school. Yet, in practice, students with IDD inconsistently receive such services and supports (Roux et al., 2021). Additionally, access to community-based disability service providers remains uneven for transition-aged youth with IDD due to long waitlists, restricted funding, and staff turnover (Awsumb et al., 2020; Schutz et al., 2021). Variations based on community type are also prominent (Test & Fowler, 2018). For example, urban communities are often more densely populated and feature more employment, postsecondary education, independent living,

transportation, and disability services options. In rural areas, however, it is more common for the nearest VR or Center for Independent Living (CIL) office to be located in another county and for public transportation options to be unavailable (Ipsen et al., 2012).

These challenges also extend to transitions from high school to postsecondary education, from residing with family to living independently, and from pediatric to adult healthcare. Although the number of inclusive postsecondary education (IPE) programs has steadily increased nationwide over the past decade, it is estimated that only about 17% of youth with IDD exiting high school enroll in higher education (Grigal et al., 2022). In urban communities, the average cost of living and rental prices are rising rapidly. In rural communities, available rental properties are often limited (Cienkus, 2022). Finally, few primary care providers specialize in working with youth with IDD or accept Medicaid (Ervin et al., 2014). These enduring transition barriers require comprehensive solutions that are tailored to the unique needs and available resources of local communities in both urban and rural areas.

Community conversations provide a promising starting point for addressing these complex transition barriers and bringing community members together to generate potential solutions (Bumble & Carter, 2021). Community conversation events employ the World Café process (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) as a structured way for community members to come together to address the most pressing concerns in their communities. As described by Swedeen and colleagues (2011), all community conversations are guided by a common process for facilitating discussion and idea generation. First, a core planning team organizes the event and invites 30-60 local community members to attend. At the event, attendees participate in three to four rounds of small-group discussion in groups of 5-10 individuals. Each round is focused on one specific discussion question. Attendees switch groups each round to interact with different community members and generate additional ideas. A final whole-group discussion is held in which each group shares the most promising ideas discussed. Notetakers are assigned in each group to write-down every idea shared. All ideas are then summarized and shared back with the

community to prompt action. This process is particularly unique in that action steps emerge from community members themselves, thus reflecting the values, needs, and resources of local communities.

Community conversations have been used extensively to identify creative, local solutions to an array of issues that matter in the lives of youth with disabilities and their families, particularly around the transition to adulthood (e.g., school-community transition partnerships, Schutz et al., 2021; transition education in rural communities, Carter et al., 2021; expanding employment opportunities, Bumble et al., 2017). As a result, the community can prompt generation of a variety of fresh perspectives and ideas from a cross-section of stakeholders with respect to employment, postsecondary education, health, housing, communities of faith, recreation, legislation, public safety, and others. Traditionally, community conversation events have been held exclusively in-person, as these events have long relied on the power and generativity of interpersonal interaction in welcoming, neutral community spaces (e.g., libraries, community centers, restaurants) with the addition of food, décor, and music. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic limited opportunities for communities to gather safely in this way and introduced the need to explore virtual adaptations. We were interested in whether a virtual approach would prompt a similar breadth and depth of idea generation by communities.

To date, only one published study has utilized a virtual approach to community conversation events. Sanderson and colleagues (2022) held a virtual community conversation event focused narrowly on inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disability. The event was considered feasible generated a number of practical ideas, and was viewed favorably by attendees. Adopting a virtual approach also reduced participation barriers related to transportation and childcare needs.

We supported two diverse communities—one urban and one rural—to implement virtual community conversation events aimed at addressing the transition needs and outcomes of youth with disabilities and their families. We were particularly interested in exploring similarities

and differences in approach and findings based on community type. We addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: What local resources do community members identify for supporting the transitions of youth with IDD?
- RQ2: What recommendations do community members have for supporting the transitions of youth with IDD?
- RQ3: How do community members view virtual community conversation events for addressing the transitions of youth with IDD?

## **Method**

### **Participating Communities**

This study occurred as part of a one-year transition planning project coordinated by our team, which was part of University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) affiliated with a research university. We invited these two particular counties in [masked state]—one rural and one urban—to participate in a pilot project aimed at developing a new community-level approach for improving the transition to employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and healthcare for youth with IDD. We wanted to develop an approach that would work well across both rural and urban communities, which led us to consider how community conversations could inform our work in each of these types of communities. Both counties were within an hour of our UCEDD and varied in many ways with regard to race/ethnicity (i.e., Delmire is primarily White, while Lyon is more diverse) and economics (i.e., Lyon has nearly twice the unemployment rate of Delmire). Each county and their affiliated school district are described in Table 1. Table 2 describes who attended each community's event.

### **Community Conversation Process**

We worked with local teams in both communities to design and host their community conversation events. Each team consisted of 10-12 diverse stakeholders (e.g., educators,

disability agency staff, parents, self-advocates, employers, higher education staff) who had volunteered to work on the development of a new community-level approach to transition. We met with each team to discuss the guiding questions and structure for their community conversation, as well as strategies for recruitment. We then assisted the teams as they planned, invited, carried out, and evaluated their events. We discuss these steps next. All procedures were approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

### ***Recruitment***

Each community invited a cross-section of least 100 local community members in order to achieve their goal of 50-60 attendees. Recognizing the importance of hearing both from people who work within and outside of formal programs (e.g., schools, adult agencies) that serve people with disabilities, they identified individuals to invite from the following stakeholder groups: educators or school staff, disability agency or organization staff, family members of youth with disabilities, employers or business representatives, individuals with disabilities, healthcare professionals, community non-profit staff, faith community representatives, and community civic group members. In addition, they identified school, disability, and community groups that could help announce the event widely throughout their county.

Members of each team personally invited community members from their lists and contacted groups that could distribute invitations on their behalf. We encouraged teams to keep track of their recruitment efforts and registration using an online spreadsheet. We also created example flyers and email invitations for each team that described (a) the focus of the event, (b) who should attend, and (c) the date/time. Both events were advertised as a collaboration between a local community disability services agency and our university.

### ***Event Procedures***

We adapted event procedures used in multiple prior studies (e.g., Carter et al., 2020; Schutz et al., 2021) for use in a virtual context. Each community conversation took place on Zoom and was scheduled for 6:00-7:30pm on a weekday evening. Attendees received a code to

access the event after registering online. Upon joining the event, attendees were asked to turn their cameras on and ensure their names were visible in their Zoom windows.

Both events adopted the same structure. The events began with a joint introduction provided by a facilitator from the local community team and a facilitator from the university team. To provide context for the ensuing discussion, the local facilitator provided a brief overview (5 min) of current transition practices in the county, prevailing barriers to successful transitions for youth with disabilities, and the transition goals of local youth and young adults with IDD. Next, the university facilitator explained the goals and structure of the community conversation (5 min). This involved explaining how small-group discussions would take place within breakout rooms, addressing conversation etiquette (i.e., being mindful of everyone having a chance to share, avoiding debating ideas, focusing on constructive solutions), and introducing the four guiding questions. The four questions were: *(1) What experiences and outcomes are important for young adults with disabilities in our community as they move from high school to adulthood? (2) What resources currently exist in our county that youth with disabilities and their families could tap into for support during transitions? (3) What new resources or partnerships could be created to support successful transitions for youth with disabilities? and (4) How do we excite and engage our community in this work?*

We allocated 15 min to each of the four questions. Prior to the event, the planning teams assigned registered attendees to initial breakout rooms (i.e., “virtual tables”) based on their roles so that diverse perspectives would be brought to each small-group discussion. The assigned groups stayed together for Questions 1 and 2 (30 min total). We then randomly assigned attendees into new breakout rooms to address Questions 3 and 4 with a new combination of their fellow community members (30 min total). Each breakout room (i.e., eight in Lyon and six in Delmire) involved 8-12 attendees who were asked to share their experiences and perspectives related to each of the questions. As they responded, others in their group reacted to, extended, and/or refined their ideas. Although we placed no boundaries on the types of

responses that could be shared, we encouraged attendees to focus on possibilities rather than barriers. In addition, one member of the local community team served as the table host and one member of the university team served as the notetaker. The table host was responsible for keeping the discussion focused on the question and encouraging everyone's participation. The notetaker was responsible for writing down every idea shared during each round of discussion. In traditional community conversations, the same person handles both of these roles.

After completing the four rounds of discussion, the attendees left their breakout rooms and joined together with everyone to hear highlights of the ideas generated by each group (10 min). The facilitators asked each of the notetakers to share one or more ideas that were considered to be most promising. Attendees from each group could add additional perspective if desired. This resulted in a list of prioritized actions from across all of the groups. To conclude the event, the facilitators thanked everyone for participating and asked all attendees to complete a brief end-of-event survey (see next section). They were told that a summary of the event would be shared with them shortly after the event.

### ***After the Event***

After each community conversation, we developed an eight-page community conversation brief that described overall attendance, highlighted ideas shared during each round of discussion, and summarized end-of-event feedback. This document was reviewed by each community team at a subsequent meeting to ensure it accurately represented the event and edits were made based on their feedback. The community teams sent their briefs to all attendees and to other community members who were interested in learning more about how they could be involved in future disability and transition efforts in their communities. In addition, each community team reviewed the complete list of all ideas discussed by attendees to determine action steps toward improving transition outcomes in their communities.

### **Data Sources**

We used multiple data sources to answer research questions. To address RQ1 and

RQ2, we analyzed all ideas captured by notetakers during each round of discussion. We defined an idea as a discrete statement or recommendation shared verbally by participants as part of the community conversation. Data for RQ1 came from ideas shared during the second discussion question (i.e., *What resources currently exist in our county that youth with disabilities and their families could tap into for support?*). Data for RQ2 came from ideas shared during the third and fourth discussion questions (i.e., *What new resources or partnerships could be created to support successful transitions for youth with disabilities? How do we excite and engage our community in this work?*). Conversation notes provided the primary source of data.

Notetakers—who were not active participants in the conversations—used Microsoft Word to type up every idea shared in their group during each round of discussion. Most had served as notetakers at prior community conversations or similar events with breakout rooms. In addition, we met with all of the notetakers to provide guidance on how to capture key ideas effectively. Additionally, we reviewed audio of each event captured using the Zoom recording feature. This proved to be advantageous when analyzing data as some ideas were not clearly or fully documented by the notetakers' conversation notes. Using the recordings, the team was able to playback the audio from each breakout room at each event to clarify attendees' ideas for coding and highlight specific quotes. Audio recording through the virtual platform addressed a common issue reported in previous publications of in-person community conversations where some conversation notes and potential ideas have been excluded due to unintelligibility (e.g., Carter et al., 2021). Each distinct idea was entered into Microsoft Excel and coded by the research team.

To address RQ3, we analyzed feedback provided on end-of-event surveys. At the end of each event, all attendees received an email inviting them to complete an anonymous survey (see Table 3). The survey incorporated seven items used in prior studies of community conversation events (see Bumble & Carter, 2021). Attendees rated their agreement with each statement using the following 4-point, Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha for the survey was 0.91. Surveys were

completed and returned by 57.7% of attendees at the Lyon event and 67.7% of attendees at the Delmire event.

### **Data Analysis**

We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses to address our three research questions. Analyses for each research question are described below.

#### ***RQ1: What Local Resources do Community Members Identify for Supporting the Transitions of Youth with IDD?***

Attendees identified specific resources in their local communities that could provide support to transition-age youth with disabilities and their families across different areas of their lives. To ensure the confidentiality of both communities, the first author coded named resources as falling within the following categories adapted from Schutz and colleagues' (2021) previous community conversation resource coding: employment supports, specific employers and businesses, education options and supports, independent living supports, health supports, family supports, social and recreational options and supports, financial supports, self-advocacy supports, other disability-specific supports, and transportation options (see Table 4). We allowed these categories to emerge from reviewing each resource mentioned in both community conversations. The resource count in Table 4 refers to the number of *distinct* resources that attendees named in each community. For example, in the *Statewide employment supports* category, attendees in Lyon named 9 different statewide programs or services (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Project SEARCH). If multiple attendees named the same resource, it was counted only once.

#### ***RQ2: What Recommendations do Community Members Have for Supporting the Transitions of Youth with IDD?***

We adopted a multi-step process for analyzing all ideas community members shared for supporting successful transitions for youth with disabilities using a modified approach to consensual qualitative research analysis (Spangler et al., 2012) as implemented in Carter and

colleagues (2021). First, we developed a master list of all ideas from each of the two events in Microsoft Excel. Next, we further separated statements that consisted of multiple distinct components. For example, an attendee suggested high school transition programs should “partner with local businesses to include information in their hiring materials about the needs of youth with disabilities.” This statement was separated into two different ideas of: (1) “*create partnerships between employers and schools*” which addressed the “partner with local businesses” portion of the quote, and (2) “*educate employers about disability*” which addressed the second half of the quote about providing “information in their hiring materials.” We also removed ideas that could not be analyzed due to ambiguity or irrelevance (e.g., “connection and networking” and “current successes and rising stars”). This process resulted in 227 individual ideas shared by participants across the events.

Three project staff members participated in data analyses. The first author read through the master list of ideas and organized them into categories (i.e., ideas aiming toward a similar goal) by writing out a comprehensive list and applying possible codes to 100% of the data. The author edited the list as new items and categories emerged. We allowed categories to emerge from the ideas we analyzed, rather than using a list of preexisting categories. If an item emerged from the data more than once (e.g., “educate employers about disability”), it was only added to the list once and marked for each of the events in which it was mentioned. See Table 5 for a complete list of coded ideas grouped by category. The second and third author examined these categories and provided feedback on their clarity and conciseness. All three authors discussed the categories until reaching consensus on distinct titles for each category of ideas. We included every unique idea that emerged whether it was discussed at one or both events. For example, the idea to “create a local, centralized transition resource” emerged at both events, while the idea for “create opportunities for families to mentor other families” emerged solely within the Lyon event.

We adopted several recommended practices in qualitative research to increase the

trustworthiness of our study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). First, to allow for triangulation of findings across the two community events, we invited key informants (e.g., self-advocates, families, agencies, school personnel, community members) with a variety of experiences, roles, views, and community backgrounds to attend each event. Second, to diminish potential biases from influencing the coding process, each project staff member analyzed the data independently prior to group consensus discussions. Third, to increase dependability and confirmability of the study, we used an audit trail that included the raw data (i.e., audio recordings and typed notetaking documents from each event), methodological notes (i.e., typed coding decision documents), and analyses products (i.e., master list and categories after each round of coding). Fourth, we shared summaries of the ideas that arose from each event with each local planning team to ensure that the way the ideas were coded accurately represented the discussions at each event.

Our data analysis process resulted in numerous stakeholder ideas clustered within categories. We determined the response frequency of ideas by identifying whether a particular idea was either mentioned at least once or not mentioned at all in each breakout group. Then, we counted the total number of times ideas coded into a particular category were mentioned within each event across all breakout groups. Although these counts do not necessarily reflect the weight that attendees attributed to each idea, we were interested in comparing the frequency with which particular ideas were mentioned across breakout groups within events, as well as which ideas were mentioned in both communities.

***RQ3: How Do Community Members View Virtual Community Conversation Events for Addressing the Transitions of Youth with IDD?***

We used descriptive statistics to summarize attendee's perceptions of each event. This included overall means and standard deviations, as well as the percentage of attendees who provided each response. For those who opted to participate in the survey, we used electronic surveys that required participants to respond to each question to proceed through the survey, so

there was no missing data.

## Findings

### Existing Community Resources

We asked attendees to identify resources in their local communities that are available to support youth with disabilities during their transition to life after high school. Attendees at the Lyon event identified 64 different resources, while attendees at the Delmire event identified 30 total resources. The most mentioned resources in both communities related to education, local and statewide employment, and social/recreation opportunities (see Table 4). Resources related to finances, transportation, and housing were much less common in both communities.

### Ideas for Supporting Successful Transitions for Youth with Disabilities

Across the two community conversation events, 227 total ideas were shared by attendees that our team coded into 42 distinct ideas. These ideas fell within nine categories: *increase access to transition resources for youth with disabilities and families, increase community awareness of disability, expand local employment opportunities, improve transition programming in schools, expand transportation options, create mentorship programs to support youth with disabilities, expand community living and participation opportunities, improve healthcare transitions, and strengthen disability service systems.* Table 5 displays each breakout group at each event and whether a particular idea was mentioned at least once or not mentioned at all. An “X” under a breakout group column indicates that the idea was mentioned at least once in that breakout group, while “-“ indicates that an idea was not mentioned. Similarities and differences in ideas emerged across the two communities.

### ***Increase Access to Transition Resources for Youth with Disabilities and Families***

In this category, the most frequently mentioned ideas related to *creating a local, centralized transition resource* for youth and families to utilize for guidance and support through the transition process. Variations on this idea were raised 16 times by Delmire attendees and 13 times by Lyon attendees. Examples included: “making a central place that has all of the

resources available, so parents and students can learn about them,” “creating a one-stop shop—this is what you need and this is where you go,” “a centralized location of resources that are available to professionals, students, and families,” and “one stop shop [with a] contact person specializing in transition services and resources.” *Creating a transition council to guide local practices* was mentioned four times, and the remaining two ideas—*creating opportunities for families to mentor other families* and *increasing the use of technology for youth with disabilities*—were mentioned one time each.

### ***Increase Community Awareness of Disability***

Ideas in this category centered around ways to educate the community about the abilities, needs, and experiences of local citizens with disabilities. The idea mentioned across the most breakout groups was *educating employers about disability*. Variations of this idea were shared nine times by Delmire attendees and 10 times by Lyon attendees. Examples included: “let [employers] know the benefits of hiring someone with a disability,” “share research showcasing the abilities of those with disabilities to use for advocacy purposes,” “raise awareness among employers about other diploma options and how these individuals can bring their skills to the workforce,” and this example from a Delmire employer who wanted “to get better education about [people with disabilities and] what their capabilities are to better understand their potential [and] ways to think outside the box to see what opportunities are available.” Two other ideas were common in both communities. Ideas for *sharing success stories highlighting people with disabilities* through local media outlets was mentioned five times in Delmire and 19 times in Lyon. Examples of ways to do this included: “publicize businesses who are hiring [people with disabilities] and give them an award,” “use social media to publicize local success stories,” and “[use] local news to interview self-advocates to get the word out.” Ideas for *infusing disability-related topics into already existing community events* (e.g., “civic clubs are always looking for speakers and would like to learn more about [people with disabilities]”) were shared eight times in Delmire and twice in Lyon.

***Expand Local Employment Opportunities***

*Expanding local employment options* was a major focus for attendees in each community conversation. This category consisted of nine distinct ideas, with four of those being mentioned in at least five different breakout groups. The idea shared across the most breakout groups was *create events and activities to connect job seekers with disabilities and employers*. Attendees shared examples of events and activities that included hosting job fairs, both at high schools for transition-aged youth and in the community for adults, inviting employers to speak at local high schools, and providing job shadowing opportunities for youth with disabilities to visit local businesses. *Create list of disability-friendly businesses and job openings* was mentioned 14 times across five breakout groups in Lyon, but only once in a single breakout group in Delmire. Other frequently mentioned ideas included *connect employers to others who have hired people with disabilities* and *include youth with disabilities in already existing employment programs and organizations* (e.g., local Chamber of Commerce). One employer in Delmire shared his willingness to connect “with other employers, as an employer, to discuss and welcome individuals with disabilities [because] we need more companies who are willing to invest in these individuals.” The local Chamber of Commerce was the most mentioned existing program and organization with whom to partner in each community, with a Delmire attendee suggesting that the “Chamber could develop a page of employers who hire people with disabilities.” Lastly, a Lyon librarian suggested including youth with disabilities in a career program that already meets at their local library and that this program “could adapt to meet the needs of any population.”

***Improve Transition Programming in Schools***

This category consisted of eight distinct ideas; three of which were mentioned in at least four breakout groups. Breakout group conversations in both communities put particular emphasis on new partnerships that could be created between schools and various community resources to strengthen postschool pathways for students with disabilities. In Delmire,

attendees most frequently discussed *creating partnerships between schools and local employment resources*, with several attendees specifically recommending partnerships be created between schools and the local American Job Center. A Delmire special educator shared that “school aides have approached the American Job Center wanting to do more for their students [and] the American Job Center has hired people that have volunteered with them once openings have come up.” Lyon attendees also focused on new employment-related partnerships, but their suggestions centered around creating new partnerships with specific employers who would be willing to hire graduating students with disabilities. For example, a Lyon special educator suggested going “out to talk to businesses to build relationships proactively before a specific student or person needs a job.”

Additionally, Delmire attendees put an emphasis on *including students with disabilities in the same school activities and programming as typical peers* to improve transition programming in schools, while Lyon attendees focused more on *making the IEPs more person centered*. Delmire attendees shared three examples of ways to include students with disabilities in the same school activities and programming as typical peers. One example, which was shared in both Delmire and Lyon, involved partnering with Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in their districts. One Delmire school staff shared that this partnership could help “to develop internships or apprenticeships for students with disabilities.” Lyon attendees shared eight ways to *make the IEP transition planning process more person centered*. One example shared by a disability agency staff involved “increasing student-led IEP meetings.” This was supported by a health care professional in another Lyon breakout group who emphasized the importance of “using an individual’s own words, rather than quieting them or silencing them.” Another idea shared in both communities was to *host transition-focused events for students and families* which focused on ways schools could host parent nights and transition fairs to learn about what supports and programs are available in each community. Many of the other ideas in this category were mentioned only once or twice in each event.

***Expand Transportation Options***

Lyon attendees focused more on ideas related to expanding local transportation options as compared to Delmire attendees, with attendees mentioning transportation ideas a total of 10 times in Lyon, but only twice in Delmire. This category consisted of four distinct ideas. *Improving existing public transportation options* was the idea mentioned most often and the only one to be mentioned in both communities. A Delmire disability agency staff shared a suggestion that was echoed by several attendees in both community conversation events regarding the importance of “improv[ing] public transportation options for special needs individuals whose parents are unable to drive them to work.” A Lyon parent shared that she wished the existing public transportation options were more accessible. Other ideas included *providing travel training for youth with disabilities, using rideshare applications (e.g., Uber or Lyft), and developing a program for typical peers to provide transportation* for youth with disabilities. A representative from a local rideshare application startup in Lyon shared that her company provides door to door service and has successfully partnered with a local inclusive higher education program. She said that they have received feedback that their transportation service makes “parents and individuals feel safer to use [and] could be a good alternative to [the local paratransit service].” A Delmire parent shared his hope for the future that someday there might be “a transportation option that uses self-driving cars.”

***Create Mentorship Programs to Support Youth with Disabilities***

Attendees from both communities shared ideas related to ways that youth with disabilities could benefit from participating in mentorship programs. Ideas included *creating employment mentorship programs, mentorships between high school students with and without disabilities, mentorships between college students with and without disabilities, and mentorships between people with disabilities*. Each of these ideas was shared in two different breakout groups. A Delmire educator suggested “establish[ing] a mentorship program for employers that are thinking about taking in a student or young adult [with a disability] to guide them into

adulthood.” Several attendees mentioned the importance of creating mentorships between peers with and without disabilities at both the high school and college levels which could, as one Lyon educator shared, “help support [students with disabilities] in the different areas of the transition process.” An example of individuals with disabilities mentoring one another was shared by a Lyon disability agency staff who hoped to “formalize somehow where older individuals with disabilities could mentor high school students with disabilities to communicate some of the victories and achievements they’ve had and how they were able to get there.” Another Lyon educator offered a similar suggestion of “training self-advocates to speak out their success and inspire others.”

### ***Other Categories of Ideas***

The remaining three categories presented in Table 5—*Expand Community Living and Participation Opportunities, Improve Healthcare Transitions, and Strengthen Disability Service Systems*—were discussed briefly in only a handful of breakout groups and were summarized into a few distinct ideas per category. Ideas for *helping people navigate the transition from pediatric to adult healthcare* were mentioned seven times in the Delmire event, with one Delmire attendee, who is both a parent and disability agency representative, sharing that “healthcare resources for schools and families [could be created] on how to prepare students for [navigating] a transition in healthcare services from adolescence to adulthood.”

### **Views of Virtual Community Conversation Events**

Attendees in both communities viewed these events quite favorably (see Table 3). Nearly everyone at the Lyon event agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation was a good investment of their time (98.7%); they met people in their community they would not otherwise have known about (98.7%); they learned about ideas, resources, or opportunities in their community that they previously did not know about (98.6%); and they identified specific ideas or steps that they personally could take to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities (93.9%). Likewise, a high proportion of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that the

conversation would help encourage important changes in their community (98.6%); it improved their views about the capacity of their community support successful transitions for youth with disabilities (98.6%); and there should be more conversations like this in the future (95.3%).

Attendees at the Delmire event shared very similar views. Everyone (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that the event was a good investment of their time, the conversation improved their views about the capacity of their community to support successful transitions for youth with disabilities, the conversation would help encourage important changes in our community, and the community should have more conversations like this in the future. Moreover, most agreed or strongly agreed that they met people in their community that they would have not otherwise known about (97.5%); they learned about ideas, resources, or opportunities in their community that they previously did not know about (95.7%); and they identified specific ideas or steps that they personally could take to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities (95.6%).

### **Discussion**

Schools, agencies, and disability organizations alike are charged with investing in policies, practices, and partnerships that can improve opportunities and supports for transition-age youth with disabilities in their local community. This study explored the application community conversation events in a virtual format. Our findings offer new insights into existing resources and promising ideas that can be leveraged for supporting the transitions of youth with IDD in rural and urban communities.

#### **Existing Community Resources**

Attendees from each community shared an array of community programs and organizations that could contribute their resources to supporting youth transitions. From the list of resources attendees shared, it was clear that community members in Lyon either were more aware of resources or had significantly more resources available to them as compared to Delmire, particularly in the categories of local disability services providers, family supports, and health supports. By inviting a cross-section of community members to share their knowledge

about these offerings, the community arrived at a much more comprehensive portrait of available resources than any individual person seemed to know about.

This process of identifying resources as part of the community conversation event is akin to community resource mapping, but engages the broader community more fully. Community resource mapping has long been a strategy utilized by special educators and transition services providers to document existing resources, supports, and services in a particular area (Flanagan & Bumble, 2022). The first step of community resource mapping involves identifying all of the resources that exist in that community as a way to determine what is available for community members with IDD and what types of services or supports might be missing. In previous studies, individuals with IDD, families, and professionals have reported lacking knowledge and awareness of transition and adult resources available in their communities (Flanagan & Bumble, 2022; Hodapp et al., 2018). Accomplishing this through a community conversation seems to be an efficient way to identify as many resources as possible, given the varying vantage points and roles of participating community stakeholders. Once those resources are identified, community stakeholders can begin to build new partnerships, strengthen existing partnerships, or create new resources that are needed. This is particularly important in light of changes in access to resources related to the pandemic such as closures, waitlists, new programming, new staffing, or other important updates community members might need to know.

Regarding the structure of the virtual community conversation events and determining an appropriate order of the discussion questions, asking attendees to identify the available resources in their communities (Q2), before discussing new resources and partnerships (Q3) and ways to excite and engage the community (Q4), was an effective way to facilitate a detailed discussion of specific solutions to local challenges. Identifying key stakeholders and resources in their communities was helpful in priming the following discussion of how those specific entities can better partner to strengthen local supports for transition-aged youth with IDD. After the event, this helped each local community team determine who to involve in future efforts to

facilitate changes and improvements.

### **Similarities and Differences in Ideas for Supporting Successful Transitions**

Both virtual events were quite fruitful, resulting in scores of ideas spanning multiple aspects of community life. This generativity is consistent with other studies using community conversations to address transition-related topics (e.g., Carter et al., 2021; Schutz et al., 2021). Many, though not all, of the ideas aligned with or put flesh to best practices. This was particularly true of the most-often mentioned strategies focused on increasing community awareness of disability, creating new partnerships with community members, strengthening existing community partnerships, and increasing employment opportunities.

Participants in previous community conversation and focus group studies on the topic of transition to adulthood for individuals with IDD have proposed similar ideas to those mentioned in the current study. For example, in their study of community conversations focused on transition education in rural communities, Carter and colleagues (2021) reported the largest proportion of attendee ideas focused on partnerships between schools and community members, career development and preparation for students, and mindsets around transition (i.e., raising awareness of the needs of students with disabilities). Similarly, the most-mentioned ideas in Schutz and colleagues' (2021) community conversation study on developing school-community partnerships addressed the topics of preparing students with IDD for employment, developing community-based vocational experiences for students with IDD, and education and training for employers and other community members on disability-related supports. Finally, Schutz and colleagues (2023) found that focus group participants in their study of paid employment for youth with severe disabilities emphasized ideas related to increasing collaboration between different community members, providing community-based work experiences for students with IDD, and providing training and information to families, disability services professionals, school staff, and employers. These similarities across different studies and communities highlights the prevalence of common post-school barriers for individuals with

IDD and the consistency in calls for change (e.g., Carter et al., 2023; Awsumb et al., 2022).

Specifically, *creating a local, centralized transition resource in each community* was emphasized in both Lyon and Delmire and emerges in response to how the delivery of transition and adult services functions in our state and across the country (Francis et al., 2018). Adult services are siloed in a variety of state departments, which may or may not have local offices. When there are local offices, they are usually responsible for providing services to large regions of the state (e.g., up to 10-15 counties for one office). Attendees shared that the delivery of transition services could benefit from a more local approach where service delivery could be overseen by one service coordinator for all available transition-related services through a singular organization or entity, or what many attendees referred to as a “one-stop shop.” This idea is one of many that highlights the movements that could be implemented in communities when key stakeholders are brought together through community conversation events to generate innovative solutions to substantial challenges.

Although both communities suggested ways of addressing a similar barrier, they often differed in the particular ways they proposed tackling them. For example, Delmire attendees suggested creating a transition council to guide local practices, which is an idea that may be more feasible to implement in a smaller, rural community like theirs. In Lyon, attendees highlighted the need for IEPs to be more person-centered which may have not arisen in Delmire due to local special education administrators sharing that they are currently focused on the basics of IEP compliance. Additionally, Lyon attendees mentioned many more ways of addressing the idea of expanding local transportation options. Suggestions around transportation might not have been shared as often in Delmire conversations due to its absence of a local public transportation system. Thus, families in Delmire were accustomed to the lack of public transportation being an issue for everyone, not just for community members with disabilities. These examples, and many others collected from each event, highlight the importance of implementing stakeholder- and community-informed practices by providing a

structured forum for ideas to emerge locally, instead of imposing them from the outside (e.g., Carter & Bumble, 2018).

### **Favorable Views of Virtual Community Conversation Events**

Both events were viewed very favorably. Each was well attended and considered valuable and informative. Only a few attendees at each event disagreed with any of the items. This is comparable to the feedback received by attendees of the virtual event described by Sanderson and colleagues (2022), as well as prior in-person events in urban and rural communities (e.g., Bumble et al., 2019; Carter et al., 2021). The ability for virtual community conversation events to receive equally favorable feedback and acceptability from attendees shows the promise of adopting a virtual approach to convening these events. We discovered a number of strengths and weaknesses in implementing these events in a virtual setting. For example, the planning process for each event was much simpler—there was no cost and no need to reserve space, identify parking availability, provide childcare, order catering, manage dietary restrictions, purchase materials, set up tables and chairs, and other essentials required for in-person event. From a data collection perspective, utilizing Zoom allowed us to fill in information missing from table host notes. Additionally, the virtual setting allowed attendees to participate from home, eliminated travel requirements for attendees who lived in widely dispersed areas, provided increased accessibility through Zoom’s “Live Captioning” capabilities, and enabled community members to participate who may have otherwise been unable to attend in-person.

With regard to drawbacks of a virtual approach, we found that meeting virtually prevented the networking conversations that typically take place before, during, and after in-person events, which helps community members get to know one another better. It also meant some registered people missed the event due to technical difficulties, which Sanderson and colleagues (2022) also reported during their virtual event. Sanderson and colleagues (2022) described an additional drawback due to technical difficulties in their virtual community

conversation event related to table host familiarity with virtual platform recording capabilities. This was not a difficulty that arose during our virtual events. Despite the reported drawbacks, favorable end-of-event surveys, in both the current study and Sanderson and colleagues' (2022) study, demonstrate that attendees hold positive outlooks on the effectiveness of virtual events and indicate that they are willing to participate in future virtual events. Overall, this project expands the repertoire of ways that communities can be convened to work jointly on pressing issues.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting results of the current study. First, it is difficult to capture what changed in each community as a result of these events. The numerous attendees likely took later actions that remain unknown to the event planners or that take time to bear fruit. Future studies should explore ways of following-up with attendees at a later time to ask about the actions they took and their results (cf., Bumble et al., 2017). Second, our findings are limited to those who choose to attend. This introduces some bias into the findings, as the people who came may have been more invested or connected than others in the community who did not attend. Future research should focus on who attends, why, and how they differ from the total population as way of clarifying the sample and informing recruitment efforts. Third, although we were able to gather acceptability of this virtual event from those who attended, we cannot make a direct comparison with in-person community conversation events within this study. Future research could explicitly investigate differences between in-person and virtual events, as this could have implications for community implementation of future events. Fourth, only one virtual community conversation event was held in each community. Future studies need to replicate the implementation of a virtual approach to community conversations with larger and more diverse samples before definitive conclusions can be made when comparing their effectiveness to in-person events.

### **Implications for Practice**

Communities looking to gather unique perspectives on potential opportunities for improving postsecondary outcomes of transition-aged youth with IDD through community conversation events may find virtual events to be particularly helpful for recruiting informal partners who are rarely included in disability-related discussions and efforts (e.g., employers, general education teachers, school counselors, civic leaders, community non-profits, faith leaders, etc.) as well as attendees who may not always have the ability to attend in-person events (e.g., self-advocates without a means of transportation, parents with young children, employers who work far from event locations). Additionally, a virtual event may be easier to facilitate for the host community or organization (i.e., reducing cost and simplifying planning), particularly for rural communities that may not have certain services and supports available in their county (e.g., public transportation). Organizers may also want to consider hosting a hybrid event, which could include both in-person and virtual attendance options, in order to capitalize on the advantages that each provides and preferences of attendees. By reducing barriers to both event attendance and implementation, the virtual approach accomplishes the primary goal of community conversation events by allowing for the inclusion of a broader cross-section of attendees and vantage points (Schutz et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Communities were resilient in forging new ways to connect and convene during the pandemic by utilizing technology and virtual platforms for community conversations. Implementing a virtual approach to community conversations was an effective way to bring stakeholders together to address transition-related challenges in local communities. Going forward, communities may decide that a virtual community conversation is more feasible for them than an in-person event. Our study suggests that community members are still willing to attend online, able to share innovative ideas, and leave with positive views. However, we encourage continued refinement of virtual community conversations and further study of its impact on efforts to improving outcomes for transition-aged youth with IDD.

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Table 1

*Community Demographics*

Variables	Lyon County	Delmire County
Population	715,884	54,315
Percent of population with disability	11.5%	17.3%
Race/ethnicity (%)		
Asian	3.9%	0.7%
Black	27.5%	4.0%
Hispanic	10.5%	4.2%
White	56.0%	92.4%
Multiple races/ethnicities	2.5%	2.2%
Poverty rate (%)	16.4%	14.3%
Unemployment rate (%)	12.3%	7.5%
Educational attainment (%)		
High School Diploma	89.5%	83.7%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	45.7%	16.2%
Health coverage (%)		
Have health coverage	88.4%	89.7%
Medicaid	14.1%	14.3%
Medicare	9.2%	11.9%
School district demographics		
Number of students served	82,000	8,000
Number of middle schools	30	4
Number of high schools	18	2
Number of community-based transition programs	8	0
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals	53.5%	39.0%
Percent of students receiving special education services	12.8%	13.5%

*Note.* According to U.S. Census American Community Survey (2019)

Table 2

*Community Conversation Attendees*

Variables	Lyon County	Delmire County
<b>Attendee roles</b>		
Educator or school staff	19 (26.8%)	18 (27.7%)
Disability agency or organization staff	16 (22.5%)	7 (10.8%)
Family member of individuals with disabilities	14 (19.7%)	10 (15.4%)
Employer or business representative	9 (12.7%)	11 (16.9%)
Individual with a disability	8 (11.3%)	6 (9.2%)
Health care professional	6 (8.4%)	1 (1.5%)
Community non-profit staff	4 (5.6%)	8 (12.3%)
Faith community representative	2 (2.8%)	3 (4.6%)
Community civic group member	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.5%)
Total number of event attendees	71	65

*Note.* Attendees could select more than one role.

Table 3

*End-of-Event Survey Findings*

Statement	Lyon ( <i>n</i> = 41)	Delmire ( <i>n</i> = 44)
This conversation was a good investment of my time.	3.6 (0.7)	3.7 (0.5)
I learned about ideas, resources, or opportunities in this community that I previously did not know about.	3.5 (0.7)	3.4 (0.6)
I identified specific ideas or steps I personally could take to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities.	3.2 (0.8)	3.3 (0.6)
This conversation improved my views about the capacity of our community to support successful transitions for youth with disabilities.	3.4 (0.7)	3.5 (0.6)
I met people in my community I would not otherwise have known about.	3.7 (0.7)	3.5 (0.5)
This conversation will help encourage important changes in our community.	3.5 (0.7)	3.6 (0.6)
We should have more conversations like this in the future.	3.6 (0.7)	3.6 (0.5)

*Note.* *M* (*SD*) based on a 4-point, Likert-type scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Table 4

*Transition-Related Resources Identified by Attendees from Each Community*

Categories	Lyon	Delmire
<b>Local disability services providers</b> (e.g., specific community-based providers who serve individuals with IDD)	7	1
<b>Education options and supports</b> (e.g., community college disability services offices, high school transition programming)	8	7
<b>Statewide employment supports</b> (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Project SEARCH, American Job Center)	9	5
<b>Local employment supports</b> (e.g., specific local employers or employment programs)	4	5
<b>Social and recreational options and supports</b> (e.g., Special Olympics, local community centers)	7	5
<b>Family supports</b> (e.g., parent support groups, parent networks)	9	1
<b>Health supports</b> (e.g., university and community-based health clinics)	8	2
<b>Self-advocacy supports</b> (e.g., local groups for people with disabilities to learn self-advocacy skills)	5	0
<b>Financial supports</b> (e.g., money management classes)	2	2
<b>Transportation options</b> (e.g., public transportation, paratransit)	3	1
<b>Local housing options</b> (e.g., housing communities, independent living supports)	2	1
<b>Total</b>	64	30

Table 5

*Number of Breakout Groups Addressing Each Idea, Organized by Theme and County*

Category/idea	Lyon breakout groups								Delmire breakout groups					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Increase Access to Transition Resources</b>														
Create a local, centralized transition resource	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	X	X	X	-	X
Create a transition council to guide local practices	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	X	-
Create opportunities for families to mentor other families	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Increase use of technology for people with disabilities	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Increase Community Awareness of Disability</b>														
Educate employers about disability	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Share success stories highlighting people with disabilities	-	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	-	-	X
Infuse disability-related topics into already existing events	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	X
Create new community events about disability	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-
Include community members with personal connections to disability	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
Educate typical peers about disability	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Educate postsecondary institution staff about disability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X
Educate faith communities about disability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X
<b>Expand Local Employment Opportunities</b>														
Create ways to connect job seekers with disabilities and employers	-	X	X	-	X	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	X	X
Connect employers to others who have hired people with disabilities	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	-	X	X	X	X	X
Create list of disability-friendly businesses and job openings	-	-	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	-	-
Include IWD in already existing employment programs and organizations	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	-	-
Prepare list of job seekers with disabilities for employers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-
Create partnerships between employers and schools	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Create partnerships between employers and disability service providers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	-
Expand non-traditional employment options for people with disabilities	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Incentivize employers with funding to hire people with disabilities	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Improve Transition Programming in Schools</b>														
Make IEPs more person-centered	X	X	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Include SWD in same school activities and programming as typical peers	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	X	-
Create partnerships between schools and local employment resources	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	X	-

Category/idea	Lyon breakout groups								Delmire breakout groups					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6
Host transition-focused events for students and families	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-
Create partnerships between schools and local colleges	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Create partnerships between schools to share effective transition practices	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X
Create partnerships between schools and local communities of faith	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-
Begin the transition conversation with SWD earlier	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Expand Transportation Options</b>														
Improve existing public transportation options	X	-	-	-	-	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	X	-
Provide travel training for individuals with disabilities	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Use rideshare applications (e.g., Uber or Lyft)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Develop program for typical peers to provide transportation	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Create Mentorship Programs</b>														
Create employment mentorship programs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-	-
Create mentorships between high school students with and without disabilities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	-
Create mentorships between college students with and without disabilities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	-	-
Create mentorships between people with disabilities	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Expand Community Living and Participation Opportunities</b>														
Create opportunities for people with disabilities to live independently	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-
Expand social and recreational opportunities	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Improve Healthcare Transitions</b>														
Help people navigate the transition from pediatric to adult healthcare	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Strengthen Disability Service Systems</b>														
Make changes to policies to increase access to services	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Provide training for providers around working with employers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-

*Note.* An “X” indicates that the idea was mentioned at least once in that breakout group. A “-“ indicates that idea was not mentioned.