

# State Agency Promising Practice

YEAR OF PUBLICATION:  
2009

TOPIC:  
Implementation of  
Priority Policy Goals

## Mandatory Situational Assessments in Tennessee

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### Background

Tennessee implemented its Employment First initiative in 2002 with a goal of making employment the first day service option for adults receiving supports from the Department of Mental Retardation Services. As part of the Employment First initiative, the state requires a periodic community-based work assessment for all individuals not currently employed in the community. State-contracted and independent individualized support coordinators ensure that individuals who are not in integrated employment participate in a community-based work assessment at least every three years. Since December 2005, employment providers can be trained in conducting situational job assessments and the importance of providing these opportunities.

### Implementation

Situational assessments are community-based experiences, also called job trials, at real jobs to help individuals learn about different work settings, job duties, and work environments. Situational assessments involve a process of systematic observation for evaluation of work-related behaviors in an actual work environment.

Community rehabilitation providers receiving funds from the Department of Mental Retardation Services (DMRS) are bound by contract to offer periodic situational assessments for individuals in sheltered employment or community-based non-work. A situational assessment is not required

for people who are employed, but it may be performed at any time it is needed. DMRS requires situational assessments

to be conducted at least every three years to evaluate not only employment opportunities but also personal interests, capabilities, and supports needed. The regularity of the assessment also re-establishes and re-introduces the option and value of community-based work to the individual who otherwise may not have the opportunity if the evaluation was not required. This mandated assessment provides an opportunity for individuals who have never worked in the community, or those who have limited work experience outside of the workshop to gain experience and first-hand knowledge about community employment.

The assessment evaluates domains such as tasks performed at the worksite, length of time at the worksite, barriers experienced, level of formal intervention required, natural supports available, likes and dislikes on the job, challenging behaviors, and mobility.

The state expects existing DMRS day services funding to fund situational assessments. However, the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) will pay agencies \$1,000 for situational assessments when a placement occurs for individuals who have expressed that they want to work in the community.

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## Impact

Tennessee providers have experienced some challenges with conducting the mandated assessments. Lack of available staff to conduct the assessments and a lack of awareness about the importance of informed choice for individuals in sheltered and non-work settings have hindered some providers. To address this issue, DMRS has targeted certain provider agencies, making training available on how to conduct situational job assessments and why it is important to provide the assessment opportunity. As reluctant providers have learned more about the importance of situational work assessments, many have begun to adopt the attitude that all people are capable of working in the community. Further, the increase in the number of providers who provide situational work assessments has led to greater opportunities for individuals to make an informed choice about integrated employment.

While situational assessments are an important avenue for encouraging community employment, DMRS has recently developed formal processes called “Discovery” and “Discovery as it Relates to Employment” for individuals who receive DMRS services. The “Discovery” process is focused on supporting individuals to structure time in community-based day services to discover their skills, interests and talents. “Discovery as It Relates to Employment” is focused on understanding an individual’s motivation to work and the type of work he or she is interested in doing. DMRS emphasizes

that Discovery should be an ongoing practice for all individuals, so that a person’s goals, skills, and interests are constantly being evaluated to ensure that their supports best meet their needs.

## Suggestions for replication

- » Make situational assessments a requirement in provider contracts to ensure that individuals in sheltered employment or non-work options can exercise informed choice in deciding where to work.
- » Ensure that assessments are not only mandatory but that they are also ongoing. As choices, experiences, and preferences change over time, individuals need consistent opportunities to explore their employment options and engage in discussions about the value of community-based employment. Periodic work trials also emphasize that movement toward employment may develop over time and establishes a long-term dialog.
- » Provide training to providers on how to conduct assessments as well as why comprehensive assessments are important.
- » Develop sanctions for providers who limit access to situational assessments.
- » Encourage situational assessments for individuals who are working in the community but desire a career change.

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Promising Practices is an initiative of the Access to Integrated Employment Project, funded in part by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration on Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services. Access to Integrated Employment is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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