

How to write an effective Individual Employment Plan

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Introduction: Why do an IEP?

There are many reasons for doing an IEP. Listed below, for your review, are six such reasons:

- 1. The IEP gives the participant a plan for using the program successfully.** Having a good plan in place is an important step in achieving a successful outcome. If you want your participants to be successful in the program then they need to have a plan for success. The IEP gives them that plan.
- 2. The IEP sets expectations toward which the participant can strive and achieve.** A properly completed IEP will provide the participant with a clear series of specific action steps they are expected to undertake.
- 3. The IEP builds self-esteem in the participant.** An IEP with short-term, attainable goals will give the participant things to achieve, and when they achieve them they will start realizing that they can accomplish things - thus building self-esteem.
- 4. The IEP gives the program a guide for effectively helping the participant.** An IEP with specific action steps gives the program a guide to what they need to do to help that particular participant be successful.
- 5. The IEP increases the number of unsubsidized placements and success stories.** When both the participant and the program specifically know what they need to do to be successful more participants will be successful and obtain unsubsidized employment or some other measure of success.
- 6. The IEP allows the program to serve more persons with limited funds.** IEPs leading to more placements free up program resources to serve more people.

These reasons, and many others, lead us to the conclusion that the IEP is not simply a piece of paper to put in the file for program auditors to find. Done properly, the IEP can be the key to a very successful program.

Preparation

- Do -
Plan & be prepared
before you start
writing the IEP

A successful IEP does not just happen. It requires a great deal of preparation leading up to it. Participants must first be prepared with the right message during recruitment and orientation. Staff members who write the IEP must be prepared and trained to write a good IEP. A lot of various information must be gathered and available when writing an IEP.

And, of course, a thorough assessment of the participant is crucial to writing a good IEP.

Recruit people who want to get somewhere

Preparing the participant for writing an effective IEP starts with your recruitment methods and, more importantly, your recruitment message. If you using recruitment methods that bring you applicants looking for a long-term entitlement, or are otherwise resistant to setting goals for themselves, it will be a lot harder to write effective IEPs. If you use recruitment messages that emphasize the temporary, training nature of the program you are more likely to get applicants who want to figure out how to move through the program to something better.

To do an effective IEP you need to recruit participants who want to use the program to get somewhere - such as a job. Then the idea of writing a plan for them to get there won't be as difficult. So you need to use recruitment strategies & messages that will attract job seekers.

Training sites must be supportive of IEPs

- Do -
Develop training
sites that will support
IEP goals

In addition to having participants who want to use the program to get somewhere you also need to have training sites that will support their plans and their efforts to get to their goal. So it is vitally important to develop training sites that will support and encourage the IEP goals of the participant(s) assigned to them.

At the very least a project should work on developing more potential training. This gives the project more options for moving participants to training sites better suited to their IEP. It also puts the project in a much stronger bargaining position when dealing with training sites. If a training site knows that they are in competition to keep the participant(s) assigned to them they will be much more inclined to provide the support the participant needs to accomplish their IEP goals. And the project can be much more selective when deciding where to place a participant, and can be placing participants in the training site best suited for achieving their IEP goals.

The participant must be prepared for the IEP

One of the biggest barriers to writing an effective IEP is the participant who is not prepared for the IEP discussion. This preparation of the participant needs to occur at a fundamental level. Does the participant understand the need for them to progress through the program? Do they understand why you are having the IEP conversation? Have the program and the IEP process been properly explained to them? Have they had time to think about what might go into their IEP? The program must prepare them for the IEP discussion before it takes place.

Use the orientation to prepare the participant for success with their IEP. Use the orientation to set high expectations from the very start. Be very clear about what you expect them to do on the

program. Stress the IEP and job development aspects of the program. Invest the time in a clear, detailed orientation. It will pay off in the long run. And then constantly reinforce these high expectations throughout their time in the program.

Staff must be prepared for the IEP

Staff preparation and training is essential for a successful IEP. The staff person writing the IEP with the participant is the critical piece of the puzzle. Making sure that staff person is properly trained is essential to developing effective IEPs.

Knowing the resource information that is necessary for completing an effective IEP is important. Always being as specific as possible is a key element of a good IEP. Having done your research in advance, and having such information readily available when writing the IEP, makes being specific a lot easier.

- Do -
Train staff in basic interviewing and counseling skills

An effective IEP process is more about interviewing and counseling than it is about completing forms. Staff should be trained in basic interviewing and counseling skills. Projects should develop local resources to provide such training to staff. Such training may be available through community colleges, one-stop employment centers, or mental health departments with senior peer counseling programs.

The staff person should not only be prepared to do IEPs in general, but they should also prepare for each individual IEP. Review the records of the participant, especially the assessment, to see what it might tell you about that person. Review any notes or memories of that participant for clues to how they might react during the IEP discussion. The staff person needs to anticipate any questions the participant might raise or any barriers the participant might throw up. Anticipating and preparing for any such barriers will help the staff person help the participant explore ways to overcome those barriers.

The counseling which staff needs to provide may include the need to discuss delicate or embarrassing subjects such as personal hygiene, health conditions, living situations, substance abuse problems, etc. Whenever such a situation arises it is helpful to think through how such a discussion might go in advance, or to otherwise prepare yourself in advance. Such preparation won't make the discussion easy, but it will make it easier.

A thorough Assessment is crucial

Don't
start an IEP until a good assessment is completed

The IEP is a plan to get the participant from where they are to where they want to be (their goal). It is very difficult, if not impossible, to tell someone how to get to where they want to be if you do not know where they are in the first place. A good assessment tells you where the participant is - their starting point. If you know their starting point and their goal you can start to figure out the necessary steps to get them from their starting point to their goal. These steps is what constitutes their IEP. So the importance of a thorough assessment cannot be under-stated.

Writing the IEP

This section covers those items that will help you come up with effective content for the IEP.

Tip #1: Envision the IEP as directions on a road map

The IEP is, essentially, directions on how to get from one place to another. In this case it is directions for the participant to get from where they are at – their assessment, to where they want to be – their goal. So it is helpful to envision the IEP as directions on a road map.



Just as when you give someone directions to follow a map you must begin from the point where they are currently at. Do not write an IEP that is far off into the future. Write an IEP that deals with where they are now, and what the next step is that they need to take to start them on their journey. Focus on that first step, or first few steps. Do not focus on that long range goal they cannot even see from where they are at. Rather, focus on taking them through the steps – the roads – that will lead them to where they can see that long range goal.

Many of our participants have to go through many steps to get to a long range goal such as unsubsidized employment. And, if you start them off with such a long range goal it will seem unreachable to them – much the same way a cross country trip would seem unreachable to someone with an unreliable car, or an inability to sit for long periods of time. So, instead of focusing on driving cross country in one trip, it is best to focus on just getting to the next state. Then once they are in that next state you plan on how to get to the state after that – and so on, and so on. The IEP is much the same way. Write a goal and action steps to get them to their next step on their journey – a step which is attainable to them. Then, once they are there, write a new IEP for getting to the step after that. You may see the long range goal of them getting a job some day, but you want the IEP – and the participant – to focus on the next step in the journey toward that goal.

When taking a cross country trip most of us would have benchmarks along the way. For instance, the first day of a trip to the west coast from New York might involve driving as far as Pittsburgh. Then when you get to Pittsburgh you have reach your first goal, and you congratulate yourself on having gotten that far. The IEP is the same. Set attainable benchmarks for the participant to achieve, and then congratulate them when they achieve that benchmark. For instance, if they want to work in an office, but never graduated high school, they should probably get their GED first. So set that as the first benchmark. Just as one might measure miles on a map, setting

benchmarks gives you a way to measure progress through the program.

Our hypothetical family driving from New York to the west coast would also have a timeline by when they expected to reach Pittsburgh – probably by the evening of the first day. Likewise, an effective IEP has timelines. The expectation must be set that a particular action step will be accomplished by a particular date. And, in an effective IEP timelines are set out as specific deadline dates. So set deadlines in the IEP so that the participant knows by when they need to do something. This will make it much more concrete and real to them.



Our final analogy with directions on a map has to do with being specific. Imagine that the driver to whom you are giving directions has absolutely no sense of direction, and is not intuitive in any way. For them, you need to give directions in very specific detail. (Go 3 miles and turn right onto 12th Street, then go 2.5 miles and turn left onto Adams Avenue, etc.) An effective IEP is the same way. It will spell out, in very specific detail, exactly what the participant needs to do. (Go to the Adams Avenue Adult School and register for Computer Applications 101 taught by Mrs. Smith on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1 to 3 p.m.)

Tip #2: Remember and use the SMART principle

An effective IEP utilizes the SMART principle. It sets out goals and action steps which are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time driven.



Be **S M A R T**

S is for
Specific

The participant must have a specific goal so that they are very clear about what it is they are trying to achieve. The steps must be very specific so that they know exactly what it is they need to do to achieve their goal. For instance – an action step that simply says the participant will do job search is very vague, and can mean many different things to different people. To you it may mean that they will be contacting employers, but to them it may mean reading the want ads in the paper once a week. If you want them to contact employers then say “contact employers.” If you want them to contact employers and submit an application then say you want them to “contact employers and submit an application.” If you want them to contact employers and submit applications for clerical jobs then the IEP should say they will “to contact employers and submit applications for clerical jobs.” (IEPs which state a goal of “getting a job” without even specifying an occupation are probably the most common error made when writing IEPs.) Remember. the more specific you can be the more effective the IEP will be.

M is for
Measurable

The participant cannot know if they have achieved a goal or completed a step unless it is somehow measurable. The measuring can be as simple a yes/no answer to the question of completing a step (ie: did they learn a specific skill, or did they enroll in a class). If the step involves doing something more than once (ie: contacting employers) then a specific number for the times this will be done should be entered. For instance, in the action step above – “contacting employers and submitting applications” an effective IEP would specify how many employers you expect them to contact. (Specifying how many applications you expect them to submit is less desirable because they cannot control if the employer contacted will accept an application or not.)

A is for
Attainable

The goal and the specific steps should be realistically attainable within

the time frame. The participant should reach to get beyond where they are now. (Remember, self growth is the whole point of the program.) However, if they try to reach unrealistically too high they could be setting themselves up for failure. To continue with the example of employer contacts – if there are only five employers for the type of job they want within a reasonable distance of where they live an IEP which requires them to contact ten employers is setting up an unattainable goal. The more common mistake here, however, would be an IEP focusing on getting a job for which they are not yet qualified, because they have not yet been trained in the skills they need. An effective IEP would focus on the training first, and on getting the job later.

R is for **Relevant**

The steps to be undertaken must be relevant to the goal stated. While the participant may be doing lots of things the action steps should focus on what they will do to achieve their goal. And their goal should be relevant to the reason(s) they are on the Senior Community Service Employment Program. For example, an IEP with a goal of getting a clerical job, should not contain an action step about taking an art class. While such a class may be desirable for its own reasons it is not relevant to the goal, and will distract the participant from the goal. The purpose of an effective IEP is to get the participant to focus on what they need to do to reach their goal.

T is for **Time Driven**

Unless specific dates are set for when each step will be completed then the IEP and *Specific Action Plan* is meaningless. Remember, this is a commitment for the participant to do certain things by certain dates. As we all know, it is simple human nature to do those things which have concrete deadlines before we do those things without deadlines. And the more concrete the deadline is the better. (Tomorrow never comes, and next week or next month are always sometime in the future.) A concrete date, which can be found on a calendar, is the most effective way to state the deadline. In the example of contacting employers above this would be a matter of setting a deadline by which you expect the specified number of employers to be contacted.

Cover relevant areas in logical order

The IEP is designed to promote a discussion of various areas where the participant may need to work. It is best if these areas can be covered in a logical order. Some of these areas, in a logical order, could be as follows:

- Training prior to reporting to training site
- Supportive services
- Occupational assessment / establishing a job goal
- Reassignment to new training site
- On-the-job training
- In-service training
- Adult basic education
- Job skills training
- Job search training
- Job search activities

Write a short term, specific action plan

The specificity necessary for an effective IEP is not to be underestimated. The more specific the IEP the better. Remember, a good IEP has Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time driven action steps.

Specific

Each Specific Action Plan needs to be extremely specific about what the participant is expected to do. Being extremely specific gives them very clear direction as to what they need to do, and also gives them very little “wiggle room” for not doing it. Break down each plan into as many specific steps as possible – the more specific the better. For instance, a Specific Action Plan about getting a GED could have the following action steps: Step 1 would specify which school to go to, which class or program to enroll in, and when to enroll in the class/program; Step 2 could specify when to attend classes, and how many classes need to be attended by a certain date; Step 3 could specify how much homework should be done, and by when. (This is just an example of one possible way to approach the Specific Action Plan.)

Measurable

In addition to describing the specific action that need to be taken an effective IEP will also include some measurement of the action. (i.e.: did the participant enroll in the class, how many classes did the participant attend, etc.) There should be something in the specific action step which provides a way for determining to what degree the participant was successful in fulfilling that action step.

Time Driven

And, very importantly, there must be a deadline set for accomplishing each specific action step. There needs to be a clear understanding of when the action needs to be taken. Otherwise, there can be no repercussions for not taking the action.

Finally, the IEP should set a tone which places the burden for action on the participant. It should make the participant accept responsibility for taking action. Then they might actually do it.

Dealing with participants who have no goals

Trying to write an IEP for a participant who has no goals is a very common occurrence. Many staff members, when faced with this problem, have a tendency to just think things up and put them down in order to complete the form. This is the wrong approach. There are three general reasons why the participant is in this situation: 1) they really have no idea what they want to do; 2) they are scared of change or are somehow letting fear block them for some reason; 3) they are really not capable of doing anything other than being on the program at their training site, or 4) they are simply obstinate and don't want to do it.

No Idea

In the first case there is a simple solution. Write an IEP that has a goal of the participant figuring out what they want to do. It could have action steps that include going to the library and reading up on a certain number of occupations, taking occupational interest tests, getting occupational counseling from program staff or others, or whatever else might be appropriate and available. After all, if they do not know what they want to do then the logical first step is to figure out what they want to do. That is the first step they need to take in their journey through the program, so write a plan to get them started.

Scared

Very often, there will be some kind of fear holding them back. (After all, we all fear change to some degree.) If it appears that some kind of fear is being an inhibitor to doing an IEP then additional counseling is in order. The IEP could then be about getting the counseling to address whatever fear is there.

Not Capable

For some participants an IEP does not seem appropriate because, when you

get right down to it, they cannot do anything other than what they are already doing. If, after working with the participant, you have determined and documented that this is the case, without too quickly assuming it is the case, there are two possible approaches. First, you might be able to find some area where the program can help the participant improve the quality of their life. (Perhaps the program can teach them how to read, or how to communicate with their grandchildren by email.) Or perhaps the IEP can discuss what they can do to help their host agency/training site, thus instilling pride in their community service. Another approach would be to identify what they need to do to maintain themselves at the status quo. If community service is all they can do it makes no sense to push them to do more.

Obstinate

Finally, there are those who want to be obstinate, and just not do an IEP. In this case the program should warn them, in writing, that failure to cooperate in doing an IEP constitutes grounds for termination from the program. (Written warning reminding a participant that they can actually be terminated from the program can have an amazing effect on their behavior.) The program can then proceed with an IEP related termination as discussed later.

Get the participant's "buy-in" to their IEP



The actual writing of the IEP should be done by a staff member. This is because it is the staff member who has been trained in how to properly write IEPs, and how to write effective IEPs. However, this does not mean the staff member should simply write the IEP, and then give it to the participant to sign. The IEP is a negotiated agreement between the participant and the program detailing what the participant will do for their development, and what the program will do to assist them in that effort. It is therefore imperative that the IEP be written with the full participation of the participant. If for no other reason, the participant has to be part of developing their IEP so that they will "buy into it" and give it their full effort.

Follow-up

The IEP is meaningless unless there is effective follow-up to it. The IEP is not meant to be a document to be filled out and filed away. It is a living, working plan for how each individual participant will get the most out of the program. As such, the IEP should be incorporated into most everything that project staff do with the participant, and should be part of most conversations that project staff have with the participant.

The IEP should determine what the participant does on SCSEP

The IEP should determine most everything the participant does while on SCSEP. **It is the IEP that should determine the participant's host agency/training site assignment.** (Too often it is the assignment that seems to determine the IEP, the opposite of how it should work.) The IEP should be brought to every monitoring visit to a participant at their training site, and their progress on the IEP should be reviewed. Staff should be checking with the participant on every action step in their IEP, and should make sure they are following through on their IEP action steps.

There can be no follow-up without a good, specific IEP

You must know exactly what it is you are following up on. The participant must know exactly

what it is they are expected to do. You cannot follow-up on that which is vague or not understood. So, if the IEP did not contain specific goals and action step to begin, does not contain measurable outcomes, and does not have deadlines with there can be no follow-up.

Involve the training site supervisor in the IEP



The training site supervisor will probably influence the participant's development more than anyone else. Don't let this influence exist in a vacuum. Make it work for you by making the supervisor part of the participant's development team. Share the IEP with the training site supervisor so they may understand what you are trying to achieve, and assist those efforts. The training site supervisor is in an ideal position to be a "coach" to the participant in their development. Whatever issue the participant's IEP may be dealing with, it is very likely that the participant's training site supervisor can be the key to a successful outcome. So make them part of the effort to achieve a successful IEP.

Follow-up is ongoing & positive - Don't wait for failure

Keep track of all important dates in the IEP, and check prior to deadlines to make sure the participant is doing what they should be doing, and committed to doing. An effective IEP process requires extensive follow-up to make sure things are happening as they need to be happening. An effective IEP is not about playing "gotch ya" after the participant failed to do something – it is about making sure they do it to begin with. IEP follow-up should be part of every visit, especially quarterly monitoring visits, to the training site. It should also be part of most discussions you have with the participant.

- Do -
Intervene to help them be successful

Don't
stick to an IEP that isn't working

It is important to remember that the IEP is about being successful in the program. It is important not only to stay on top of the participant to make sure they are doing what they need to do, but also so you can intervene to help them be successful when it becomes necessary to do so. Helping them achieve their goals is what the program is there for. And, if it becomes apparent that the goals and action steps are not attainable by the participant it is important to reevaluate those goals and action steps, and rewrite the IEP with goal and action steps which are attainable.

When all else fails - IEP related terminations

An IEP related termination is an admission of failure – not only of the participant, but of the program as well. IEP related terminations do not reflect well on the program, and should only be

Don't
terminate a participant without sufficient warning

used as a last resort measure. There are three main questions which before proceeding with an IEP related termination. First, did the participant know exactly what was expected of them? (In other words, was the IEP really specific?) Second, did the program must make attempts to help the participant succeed? (What did the program do, when did it do it, and what was the outcome?) Finally, was the participant specifically and sufficiently warned about termination for not following their IEP? (There better be copies of warning letters, and they best be very specific.

U.S. DOL guidelines for IEP related terminations are specified in Older Worker Bulletin 96-11.

Summary: Using the IEP for Success

So, to summarize all that has been said here there are two conclusions to be drawn. First, if IEPs are done right the participant succeeds in the program. Second, If the participants succeed because IEPs are done right the program also succeeds. It pays to take the time to do effective IEPs.

Some points to remember for writing effective IEPs are:

1. Participants need to be prepared to do an IEP. This starts with a recruitment message and orientation that stresses that this is a dynamic program about helping them reach goals. It continues with giving them a chance to think about their goals before doing an IEP. And it involves a thorough assessment of the participant having to know where they are starting.
2. The staff must be prepared to do the IEP. This includes knowing IEP procedures and forms. It also means getting to know the participant they are helping develop an IEP, and preparing to address any barriers they may have, and/or preparing to discuss any delicate subjects that may need to be addressed. Most importantly, they must know all the local resources that can be used to help the participant complete their action steps and achieve their goals.
3. The staff must engage the participant in a conversation and make use of various counseling skills. Such skills include: Attending, Active Listening, Asking Questions and Avoiding Roadblocks. They must have the participant's confidence and trust to be successful.
4. Each IEP should be written as specifically as possible. The SMART acronym should be used to make sure the goals and action steps are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time Driven.
5. There should be a succession of specific short-term IEPs with each one moving the participant one step closer to their ultimate goal (hopefully a job). The timing of each IEP should be determined by the action steps involved, not by an arbitrary limit.
6. If a participant has trouble articulating a goal staff should explore to determine the reason why, and then apply the response appropriate to that reason.
7. The participant must "buy-in" to their IEP. They must be committed to achieving it.
8. The IEP should determine most everything the participant does while they are on the program, especially their host agency/training site assignment.
9. There can be no follow-up unless a specific, measurable, time driven IEP was written to begin with.
10. Follow-up should be ongoing, not waiting for a three-month monitoring visit, and should occur in time for the participant to successfully complete their action step by the deadline.

Any comments, suggestions, etc. would be appreciated, and can be directed to:

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