

Promising Practices

Brief 2

The Use of Service Funds in Maryland PROMISE

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The Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project is a 5-year, two-group, randomized controlled trial funded by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2013. Six sites were awarded funding to test the effectiveness of a multicomponent experimental intervention for improving academic, career, and financial outcomes for youth with disabilities receiving supplemental security income (SSI) benefits and their families. Awardees include Arkansas, ASPIRE (a consortium of six western states), California, Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin.

outcomes, increased earnings, and decreased public income support.

MD PROMISE recognized that low family income can often act as an impediment to participation in the very services that are intended to increase employment and economic self-sufficiency. Without the means to meet the costs of transportation, work equipment and related items, and even episodic basic household expenses such as utilities, project participants faced the prospects of not receiving and therefore not benefitting from project services.¹ Accordingly, MD PROMISE allocated funds, called Service Funds, to be made available to cover such costs on an as needed basis.

Overview

The federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program provides a monthly income benefit and medical coverage to youth who are deemed to have a significant disability and living in households with annual income levels at or below the federal poverty level. That is, these youth have the dual challenge of poverty and disability, each of which are associated with high rates of adult unemployment and lack of connectedness to community and social supports. Maryland Promoting Readiness for Minors in SSI (MD PROMISE) is a statewide project intended to increase the likelihood that youth who receive SSI in Maryland, and their families, will experience better employment

This brief summarizes information on how Service Funds were spent from April 2013 through September 2018, the duration of the PROMISE intervention, to the 997 youth and families who were assigned to the treatment group statewide. It also offers implications for transition and employment service practice for youth receiving SSI.

Allocation of Service Funds

The MD PROMISE intervention was organized through a team of professionals including a case manager, family employment specialist, as well as a benefits

¹ Key MD PROMISE interventions: assertive case management, work-based learning experiences, benefits counseling and financial literacy services, and family training and information.

specialist and school personnel, as necessary, who worked cooperatively and intensively with youth and families to deliver MD PROMISE services. A case manager or family employment specialist could request Service Funds on behalf of a participating youth or family. MD PROMISE enacted a careful process for project staff to request and distribute Service Funds to or on behalf of MD PROMISE participants.

In order for funds to be applied for youth and/or family participants the following conditions had to be met: 1) funds must be used for items or programs that assist youth and/or their families to move towards paid employment, work experience, and/or secondary education goals; 2) funds must be used only after identifying, pursuing, and exhausting other community, private,

and/or public and family resources that may be used for the item or service; and 3) the use of funds must align with the youth and/or family goals.

The categories for fund expenditures and their definitions are summarized in table 1.

Use of Service Funds

Over 50% or 518 MD PROMISE participants accessed the Service Funds totaling \$374,746. The two categories of expenditures that were most used for youth were transportation (21% of total funds spent) and household support (14%), followed by drivers education (12%), interpreter services (11%), education/tuition (7%), school supplies (7%), and work clothes/equipment (7%).

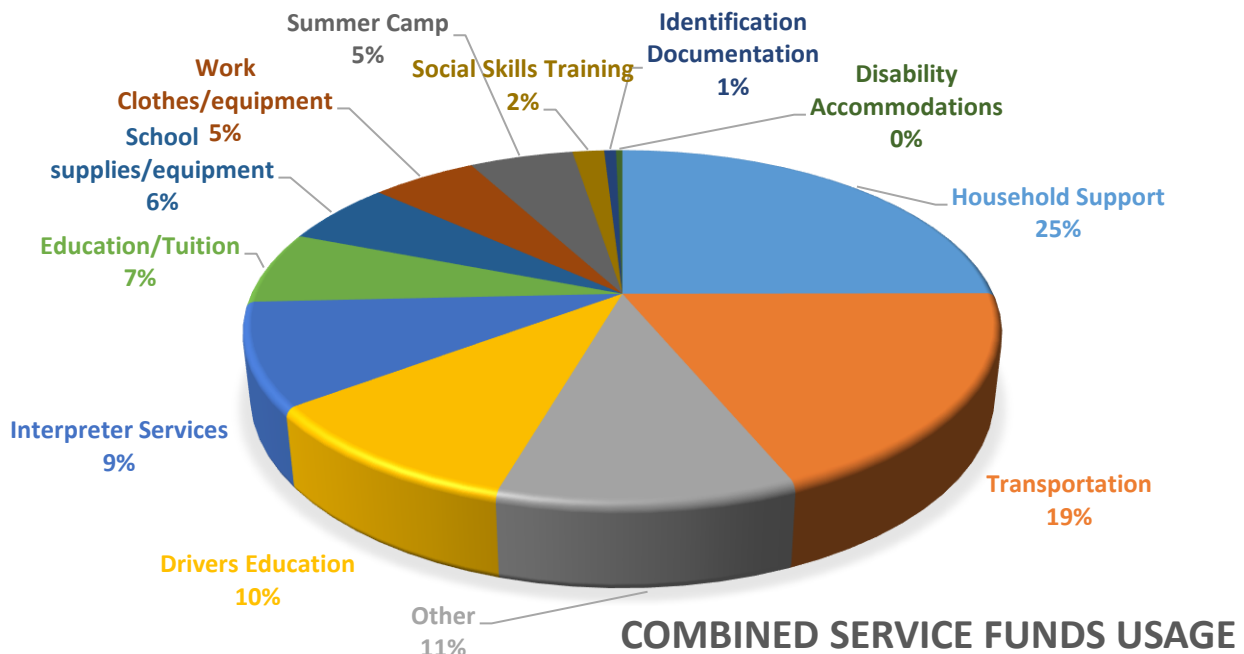
Table 1: Service Learning Fund Categories

Category	Definition
Transportation	Bus passes, taxi, cab vouchers, fuel costs, car repairs, bicycles, etc.
Drivers Education	Tuition and fees for driving school, drivers education
Education/Tuition	Special classes, tutoring, summer school, job training, trade school (i.e., any education expenses outside of those related to public education)
School supplies/equipment	Items not available or not covered through public education services such as gym clothes, athletic equipment, books, materials, etc.
Work clothes/equipment	Items necessary to participate in work experiences or jobs
Interpreter services	ASL interpreter services, English/foreign language interpreter services
Household support	Rent, furniture, food, utilities
Identification documentation	Birth certificate, state I.D. fees, driver's license as necessary to apply for jobs
Disability accommodations and support	Communications devices, job coaching, special equipment – anything necessary to accommodate disability on the job
Social skills training	Special classes or programs designed to promote social skills development
Summer Camp	Summer camp entities, and supplies associated with attending such camps, when applicable to a path to employment and/or to allow parents to maintain employment
Other	Anything not categorized elsewhere such as focus group participation, expenses related to attending and presenting at relevant training and conference, etc.

One hundred and sixty-eight families used Service Funds. By far, household support (69% of total funds spent) was the largest category of Service Funds spent for families. Although much smaller, transportation (11%) was the next largest category of Service Funds spent.

When combining all of the Service Funds for both youth and families, it is clear that the use of funds was consistent across categories. That is, whether the funds were spent on behalf of youth or on behalf of other family members, household support and transportation were the largest areas of need, followed by lesser needs in the other categories. The chart below depicts the percentage of funds spent in each category for all users of Service Funds.

food, rent, or utilities, presented barriers to participation in project activities for many youth and their families. Combined, household support and transportation accounted for almost 44% of the total Service Funds spent. The need for other services were not necessarily insignificant in comparison, as drivers education, interpreter services, tuition, work supplies/clothes, and other services were clearly needed by many participating youth and their families. It will not be known until further analysis how these funds influenced overall access to and participation in specific project services. In addition, without further analysis it is premature to determine whether these funds will ultimately correlate with post-project employment and income status. However, it is clear that, by



Implications

The largest portion, almost 25%, of the MD PROMISE Service Funds were used for household support. This means that basic expenses associated with daily living, such as

virtue of the application of these funds in MD PROMISE, there are currently gaps in available resources that would enable SSI youth and their families to pursue education

and work preparation activities that potentially contribute to improvement in their employment and economic circumstances.

When service funds were used, typically a short-term solution to an immediate need, a plan was put into place and funding was contingent on families taking action such as participating in financial education to address the long financial issues. Having access to even a small pool of flexible funding was helpful not only to address items such as costs of obtaining documentation needed to apply for jobs and drivers education which enhance a youth's employability, but also serve as a useful mechanism to get families engaged in the longer term solutions that would address their fiscal stability such as benefits counseling and financial education. Thus, when transition and employment services are provided to low income youth and their families, it is important to be aware of how family economic circumstances might affect availability to fully participate and benefit from these services.

MD PROMISE Service Funds

Below we offer a few examples of how MD PROMISE used Service Funds to support youth in meeting their work goals.

James frequently attended school with dirty clothes. A wash machine was purchased for the family that enabled him to dress appropriately for his work experience in a retail store.

Natalie's job required hours that did not correspond to the bus schedule. Taxi vouchers enabled her to get to the job on time.

Malik completed a work experience in animation and wanted to continue his training and education in this area. After being accepted to a local college, the necessary technology was purchased so Malik could fully participate in his course of study.

Kaitlyn was excited about her new job opportunity with a construction company. The purchase of work boots allowed her to safely fulfill her job duties.