



Five Questions to Ask to Support Independent Living

Planning for a student's transition from high school to early adulthood can be complex and overwhelming. After all, it is hard to anticipate the needs each person will have in the years to follow. The challenges of a disability can make transition planning more complex and the questions you have will likely change over time.

"Filling your toolbox" with information and access to services early on can help answer some of those questions and make the process less overwhelming. Many steps towards independent living are complex and time-consuming. Starting eligibility applications early can ensure access to support services when they are needed.

Here are five questions to ask to support independent living:

1. What services are available to individuals with disabilities looking to join the workforce?

Employment looks different for each individual. Each student brings different strengths to the workforce, and each family works through a unique series of challenges to guide them along the way. The agency charged with providing employment services and support to adults with disabilities is the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). Northstar IEP and IAP Liaisons are here to help you through the eligibility application. We recommend that you apply as early as tenth grade as the eligibility process can take time.

Sometimes, students can receive Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) while they are still completing high school. This is a good way to learn about the services DARS has to offer and what steps students can take toward employment.

Learn more about DARS by [clicking here](#).

2. How does college factor into transition planning?

Transitioning to college is another possible transition from high school. More and more colleges now offer support services and modified programming to open access to learners of all needs. Be aware that in college, protections offered to students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) no longer apply. The Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees equal access to college students with disabilities. Visiting prospective colleges' Offices of Student Accommodations can be a helpful step in assessing the fit of that college experience.

We are glad to be located near community colleges with very active and supportive Offices of Student Accommodations. Learn more about their work here:

Reynolds Community College

Courage to Succeed

Brightpoint Community College

3. What is the difference between Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)?

SSI provides minimum basic financial assistance to older adults and persons with disabilities (regardless of age) with very limited income and resources. On the other hand, SSDI supports individuals who are disabled and have a qualifying work history, either through their own employment or a family member.

Many people who have been diagnosed with an ADA protected disability are eligible to collect SSDI benefits based on their parents' work experience when their parents retire. Understanding how SSI and SSDI can impact your student's long-term financial picture is a critical piece of a complicated puzzle. Attorneys who specialize in special needs law can help families identify the financial planning tools and benefits that make sense for your family.

The Disability Law Center of Virginia has useful guidance materials to help you along the way. Check them out by [clicking here](#).

4. Is it possible to gain employment and not lose disability benefits?

Navigating the procedures necessary to stay in compliance with all of the agencies supporting an individual with a disability is not always straightforward. Thanks to a special grant, **Work Incentives Special Advocates (WISAs)** are now available to DARS clients and can help them be engaged in the workforce while continuing to collect the benefits they need to maintain their health and stability. Contact your DARS counselor to learn more about this service.

5. What transportation options are available?

Our Northstar families tell us that the best strategy for transportation is just like the strategy they have used for many other areas in their student's lives - have multiple options. Even if an individual is going to be a driver, they may not feel comfortable driving in all types of weather, traffic conditions, or states of mind. A Care Card allows a person to use the Carevan, a door-to-door van service at no cost through 2025. Completing the eligibility paperwork takes about 40 minutes. The approval process takes about three months. Even if an individual with a disability doesn't plan on using this or a similar service as a primary means of transportation, it is a useful back-up tool.

Learn more about eligibility by [clicking here](#).

If a person has a Care Card, they can also ride the GRTC bus for free! GRTC even offers free travel training to help individuals learn to ride the bus safely. A Travel Training Instructor will meet with your family, get to know your student, and make a travel training plan with you.

Learn more about travel training by [clicking here](#).

Finally, if an individual with a disability is planning to take the tests required for a Learner's Permit or a Driver's License, be sure to ask for testing accommodations that will allow them to produce the most authentic results.

See more information about this by [clicking here](#).