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## **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:  
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

**Social Change Portfolio**

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## Contents

[Overview](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Scope and Consequences](#)

[Social-ecological Model](#)

[Theories of Prevention](#)

[Diversity and Ethical Considerations](#)

[Advocacy](#)

[References](#)

[ScholarWorks Contributor Agreement](#)

## OVERVIEW

**Keywords:** Neurodivergent, Autism, ADHD, Intellectual Disabilities, Employment, Unemployment, Neurodivergent Advocacy, Autism, Advocacy, ADHD Advocacy, Intellectual Disabilities Delay Advocacy, IDD Advocacy, Prevention Programs, Hiring Inclusion, Employment awareness Increasing Employment Opportunities and Community Inclusion for Neurodivergent Individuals with Autism, ADHD and intellectual disabilities.

[From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC](#)

### Goal Statement:

The goal of this Social Change Portfolio is to identify prevention-focused strategies that reduce unemployment among neurodivergent individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays by promoting inclusive hiring practices, creating access to vocational training and workplace accommodations, encouraging employers to adopt neuro-affirming practices, and equipping counselors to support clients in navigating employment challenges and advocating for workplace inclusion.

### Significant Findings:

In Charlotte, North Carolina, many neurodivergent people, including those with autism, ADHD, or intellectual disabilities, continue to face major challenges finding and keeping steady jobs. Across the country, about 85 percent of autistic adults are unemployed, one in three adults with ADHD are out of work, and only about one in three adults with intellectual disabilities have jobs. Among those who do, fewer than one in five work in settings that pay fair wages and promote inclusion (Creative Spirit, 2024; ERIC, 2023). Families in Charlotte report long waits

for vocational rehabilitation and limited access to job coaching or training opportunities (Disability Rights North Carolina, 2025). These barriers often lead to frustration, financial strain, and mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, and isolation (Franke, 2024; Springer, 2024). Many of these challenges come from stigma, limited workplace flexibility, and a lack of understanding about neurodivergent strengths (Joshi et al., 2023). However, there are programs that show success. Project SEARCH helps young people with disabilities gain real-world job experience, and nearly nine out of ten participants find meaningful work afterward (Rutkowski et al., 2020). College-based initiatives such as Think College also improve employment outcomes, with graduates three times more likely to find jobs than peers who only finish high school (Grigal et al., 2018; Parisi and Landau, 2019). These findings highlight that Charlotte has both a challenge and an opportunity to build a more inclusive workforce that recognizes neurodivergent talent as a strength, supports families, and strengthens the overall health and well-being of the community.

#### Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps:

To increase employment opportunities and improve quality of life for neurodivergent individuals in Charlotte, North Carolina, several strategies and interventions are recommended. First, community collaboration is essential. Partnering with organizations such as NCWorks Career Centers, LiNC-IT, and Creative Spirit can expand inclusive hiring pathways by encouraging employers to participate in neurodiversity awareness training and to develop paid internship or apprenticeship programs that align with participants' strengths and interests. Second, implementing evidence-based transition and training programs through collaboration with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Project SEARCH, and local businesses can help create high school-to-work opportunities that provide real-world job experience, coaching, and life

skills development for youth with disabilities. These programs should be evaluated regularly to ensure equitable access and measurable employment growth. Third, partnerships with local colleges and universities are needed to expand postsecondary inclusion using the Think College model, which supports students with intellectual and developmental disabilities through coursework, job readiness training, and peer mentoring to promote meaningful employment after graduation. Fourth, support for families must also be strengthened by working with community organizations such as the Autism Strong Foundation and NAMI Charlotte to create workshops and support groups focused on mental health, stress management, and navigating vocational systems. Finally, employer education and accountability are key. Offering professional development, recognition programs, and resource toolkits through agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Office of Disability Employment Policy can help businesses build neuroinclusive workplaces that sustain long-term success. Collecting and sharing local data and personal stories will also help highlight progress, identify barriers, and inspire other North Carolina communities to adopt similar approaches toward inclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

Work is more than just a paycheck; it gives individuals structure, purpose, and connection. Yet, for so many individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays, finding and keeping a job is an uphill battle. Even when they have the skills and desire to work, they often face exclusion, stigma, and limited access to accommodations or training opportunities that support their success.

As a counselor in training and parent of a neurodivergent teen living in Charlotte, I see how these barriers affect not just the individual, but also their families and communities. The lack of neuro-affirming work environments, career and development training in and after high school and the limited understanding among employers about how to best support neurodivergent employees further widen the gap. Counselors play a crucial role in prevention by helping clients navigate employment challenges, advocate for accommodations, and build confidence as they transition into the workforce.

### **Goal Statement**

This Social Change Portfolio focuses on unemployment among neurodivergent people as a public health and mental health concern, exploring how prevention and advocacy can open more inclusive pathways to work. Addressing systemic barriers such as stigma, limited training access, and lack of workplace accommodations can help move the conversation from exclusion to inclusion.

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## **PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES**

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

The problem I am focusing on is the high rate of unemployment among individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays. Nationally, adults with autism face unemployment rates estimated between 50 and 80 percent, compared to only about 3 to 4 percent in the general population. People with ADHD and intellectual developmental delays also experience unstable employment or underemployment. Many of the available jobs do not match their strengths, offer livable wages, or support their ability to achieve independence.

In Charlotte, many families describe long waits for vocational rehabilitation services and limited access to reliable job coaching. Consistent on-the-job support could help neurodivergent individuals strengthen their skills, confidence, and ability to adapt in real work settings. These challenges are compounded by systemic barriers such as social stigma, limited job availability, limited employer understanding of neurodivergence, and a lack of accommodations within the workplace. Even as awareness grows, many employers remain uncertain about how to create inclusive and accessible hiring processes or how to implement neuro-affirming environments that promote success for all employees.

Despite ongoing advocacy and awareness efforts, employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals have changed little over time. Structural barriers and underdeveloped programs still limit access to meaningful and sustainable work. The impact of unemployment reaches far beyond financial strain. For many neurodivergent individuals, not having access to meaningful work impacts more than finances it affects mental health, self-worth, and connection to community. Ongoing financial stress can take a physical toll and limit access to preventive healthcare, particularly when unemployment or low-paying jobs do not offer affordable coverage. Families and caregivers also carry this weight, often juggling emotional and financial responsibilities that increase stress, strain relationships, and affect overall wellness. At the community level, high unemployment among neurodivergent populations translates to lost and unused productivity that could increase dependence on public supports, and missed opportunities for businesses to benefit from the creativity, focus, increased community engagement and dedication these individuals bring to the workforce.

## Goal Statement

The goal of this Social Change Portfolio is to identify prevention-focused strategies that reduce unemployment among neurodivergent individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays by promoting inclusive hiring practices, creating access to vocational training and workplace accommodations, encouraging employers to adopt neuro-affirming practices, and equipping counselors to support clients in navigating employment challenges and advocating for workplace inclusion.

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## PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

As a parent with a vested interest and deep awareness shaped by my environment, I aim to educate others on how high unemployment rates among individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities, along with the lack of awareness, training, and inclusive programs, impact employment outcomes. Employment challenges extend far beyond the workplace, influencing mental health, identity, and overall well being. By examining these issues through the broader lens of the social ecological model, we can better understand how factors at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels collectively shape opportunities for neurodivergent individuals.

At the individual level, many face challenges such as unemployment or underemployment, which can contribute to financial instability, limited social engagement, and increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. Difficulties with executive functioning such as organization, working memory, emotional regulation, task initiation, task switching, and time

management, along with social skills including communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and self advocacy, can make navigating the employment process challenging. These challenges may affect how individuals complete job applications, prepare for and participate in interviews, and understand workplace expectations or available accommodations. Similar to how individualized education plans (IEPs) and 504 plans in schools provide structured supports to promote success, workplace accommodations can help employees access the tools they need to work toward employment success.

Many neurodivergent individuals face challenges that others may not notice, such as sensitivity to noise, lighting, or smells, and may require additional support in understanding and interpreting written materials such as manuals, modules, or emails that lack clarity. Visual aids, structured systems with clear instructions, and allowing space for creativity can provide meaningful support. Every neurodivergent individual has different needs, and there is no one size fits all approach. However, offering even minimal accommodations can make a significant difference. For example, providing written summaries after meetings for full disclosure and clarity, quiet workspaces, or flexible schedules can support focus and emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation and social interaction are additional areas where neurodivergent employees may need support, particularly when working with coworkers or upper level management. Career counseling, job support coaching, and mental health counseling can play key roles in strengthening communication and coping skills while also fostering self advocacy and resilience. At the individual level, a neurodivergent employee may benefit from working with a counselor to identify what types of accommodations they need and how to effectively

communicate those needs in the workplace. This process not only empowers the individual but also helps create more open and supportive dialogue between the employee and employer.

At the relationship level, interpersonal factors further influence employment experiences. Families often experience financial strain when a neurodivergent member is unemployed or underemployed, and this dependency may limit opportunities for independence. Unfortunately, there is a significant cliff after graduation and during the transition into adulthood, which contributes to unemployment. Parents and caregivers often feel overwhelmed preparing for this stage, while schools may lack the support or capacity to intentionally plan in the best interest of the student. This gap can make the transition particularly stressful, especially when accommodations are unclear or unavailable. Stigma or misunderstanding from coworkers or supervisors can also lead to stress, isolation, or burnout. In contrast, protective factors include supportive family members, peers, and mentors who provide encouragement and advocacy. These relationships serve as buffers against the stressors of navigating work environments and can promote confidence and personal growth within the individual (Costley, 2025).

The community level also plays a vital role in shaping employment outcomes. In Charlotte, North Carolina, local challenges include long waiting lists for vocational rehabilitation services, limited access to job coaching programs, and a lack of accessible career development and job training opportunities in both high school and postsecondary settings. Families often describe frustration navigating systems that are not accessible, which can delay progress toward meaningful employment. Increasing awareness at the community level among employers, schools, service providers, and policymakers is essential to building a shared understanding of inclusion and strengthening supports for neurodivergent individuals. Collaboration between

schools, businesses, nonprofits, and mental health providers can help establish supported employment programs, inclusive workplace policies, and reliable transportation systems that remove barriers to work (Guy Evans, 2020).

At the societal level, structural barriers continue to block inclusion and equity in the workforce. Discriminatory hiring practices, stigma, and weak implementation of inclusive education and employment policies contribute to these inequities. Protective factors include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which ensures access to workplace accommodations, and the Vocational Rehabilitation program, now known in North Carolina as the Division of Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD), which provides funding, job training, and employment placement services for individuals with disabilities. Expanding neurodiversity hiring initiatives, promoting awareness campaigns, and increasing employer training can reduce stigma and help shift organizational culture toward true inclusion (Costley, 2025).

Ultimately, supporting neurodivergent individuals in employment requires collaboration at every level of the social ecological model. Employers and upper management play a key role in creating work environments that are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the needs of all employees. Meeting both the individual and employer where they are and recognizing the challenges each faces can build trust and shared accountability. Counselors can assist individuals in understanding their needs, building advocacy skills, and connecting to resources that support their personal and professional growth. By strengthening relationships among individuals, families, workplaces, and communities, and by fostering systemic change through advocacy and

education, meaningful employment can become a reality rather than a challenge for neurodivergent individuals.

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## **PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION**

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

The Precaution Adoption Process Model (PAPM) is a stage-based theory that explains how individuals move from being unaware of an issue to taking action to address it. Originally developed to understand health-related behaviors, PAPM has been widely applied to areas that involve awareness, decision-making, and behavioral change (Weinstein et al., 2008; National Cancer Institute, 2005). This theory applies to employment for neurodivergent individuals because it shows how people shift from being unaware to taking intentional action, much like how employers, educators, and communities learn to adopt inclusive and neuro affirming practices.

Applying PAPM to this population helps explain how attitudes toward neurodivergence evolve across different stages. Some employers may be unaware of the barriers neurodivergent individuals face, while others may be aware but not yet engaged. As education and communication improve, employers often begin to see the value of inclusion and take action by developing inclusive hiring policies and workplace accommodations. The final stages involve implementing and sustaining these inclusive practices over time.

Research supporting PAPM demonstrates that interventions aligned with its stages can significantly increase awareness and the likelihood of behavior change among target populations. This evidence supports using PAPM to design prevention and advocacy programs that guide

employers and communities through stages of understanding and action related to neurodiversity inclusion.

Communication Theory focuses on how information is shared, interpreted, and acted upon within relationships and systems. Applying this theory to neurodivergent employment offers a deeper understanding of how messages about inclusion, capability, and accommodation are delivered, received, and interpreted by multiple audiences, including employers, coworkers, clients, and community stakeholders (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Miscommunication or unclear messaging can reinforce stigma, while effective and intentional communication through storytelling fosters empathy, understanding, and collaboration.

In the context of employment, Communication Theory supports the development of awareness campaigns, workplace trainings, and advocacy initiatives that use accessible language and promote neuro affirming dialogue. By improving how messages about neurodiversity are framed and shared, organizations can reduce stigma and create inclusive environments that benefit all employees.

Research shows that targeted communication strategies can improve attitudes toward disability and inclusion. Workplace diversity training grounded in Communication Theory has been linked to higher levels of awareness, empathy, and retention of employees with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2018). Communication Theory therefore provides a strong foundation for developing prevention programs that use education and dialogue to shift perceptions and promote acceptance of neurodiversity.

## **Evidence-Based Program: Project SEARCH**

An evidence based program that aligns with both PAPM and Communication Theory is Project SEARCH, a transition to work model that supports individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities through hands on training and structured employment preparation. Participants spend part of their day in classroom instruction and part in worksite rotations, supported by job coaches and mentors.

Project SEARCH illustrates the impact of awareness, communication, and applied learning in improving employment outcomes. Research shows that graduates of Project SEARCH achieve significantly higher rates of competitive employment and job retention compared to peers who receive traditional transition services (Rutkowski et al., 2020). The model reflects the PAPM framework by guiding employers from awareness to active inclusion and incorporates Communication Theory through ongoing collaboration among schools, employers, and job coaches to ensure clear, consistent communication throughout the training process.

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## **PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

Unemployment among individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays remains disproportionately high compared to the general population including Charlotte, NC. Within this broad group, BIPOC individuals are affected at even greater rates due to gaps in access and opportunities that includes education, healthcare access, and workforce opportunities. Research shows that BIPOC individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions often experience

delayed diagnoses, limited access to culturally responsive services, and higher unemployment when compared to White counterparts (Broderick et al., 2025; Joshi et al., 2023). These compounded barriers stem from racism, stigma within communities, and vocational support programs that, while designed to help, are often inefficient, difficult to navigate, and inconsistently funded—leading to heightened vulnerability in employment outcomes.

To increase the cultural relevance of prevention programming, several strategies can be implemented. First, engaging families in culturally appropriate ways is essential. For many BIPOC families, decision making and support are collective, and programs that include families through peer support, partnerships with local churches, and intergenerational involvement foster trust and sustained engagement. Programs must also address the unique needs of single parents and caregivers, who often experience greater stress, fewer resources, and limited time to participate in traditional supports. Offering flexible scheduling, child care, respite services, and caregiver peer networks ensures these families can fully participate in employment prevention programs. This approach is developmentally appropriate because individuals with intellectual and developmental delays often rely on ongoing family support into adulthood, and caregiver well-being directly influences the individual's ability to pursue and maintain employment.

Second, collaborating with high school and college transition programs can provide peer mentoring and opportunities for community engagement with young adults who serve as relatable role models. These mentors help foster community connection, motivation, and self advocacy while modeling how to navigate both higher education and employment. This strategy supports developmental needs for autonomy and identity formation while promoting practical vocational skills.

Third, involving community leaders, nonprofits, and public figures such as athletes can reduce stigma, increase the visibility of BIPOC neurodivergent individuals, and strengthen community level support for inclusive hiring. Because adolescents and young adults often look to community role models for guidance and belonging, this strategy aligns with developmental goals of self efficacy and social inclusion.

Ethical considerations are foundational in designing prevention programs for this population. Stakeholder collaboration must be authentic and ongoing, involving families, community leaders, and neurodivergent individuals themselves in both planning and evaluation to prevent paternalism (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014, A.1.d.; A.7.a.). Informed consent requires thoughtful adaptation for individuals with developmental delays; counselors must use accessible language, confirm understanding, and include family or legal representatives when appropriate while respecting client autonomy (ACA, 2014, A.2.a–A.2.d.). Confidentiality remains central, especially when programs engage employers, churches, or community partners. Counselors are ethically required to protect sensitive information related to diagnosis or vocational limitations, disclosing only with informed consent and clearly explaining the boundaries of confidentiality (ACA, 2014, B.1.c–B.2.e.). These safeguards ensure that prevention programming is both effective and aligned with professional ethical standards.

In summary, BIPOC individuals with Autism, ADHD, and intellectual developmental delays face unique and disproportionate barriers to employment due to intersecting systemic inequities. Prevention efforts that integrate family engagement, targeted supports for single parents and caregivers, culturally relevant peer mentoring, and collaboration with community leaders can enhance both cultural relevance and developmental appropriateness. Grounding these

interventions in the ACA Code of Ethics ensures that programming remains collaborative, respectful, and protective of client rights.

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## PART 5: ADVOCACY

### **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Employment as a Mental Health and Public Health Priority in Charlotte, NC**

According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015), Domain IV emphasizes counseling and advocacy interventions at the individual, institutional, community, and public policy levels. Counselors are called not only to empower clients within sessions but also to challenge the systemic barriers that maintain inequities. This framework applies directly to employment disparities affecting neurodivergent individuals. Advocacy is essential for promoting inclusion, equity, and access to meaningful employment. As a counselor in training, applying these competencies supports efforts to address disparities, strengthen prevention, and promote mental wellness across diverse systems (Toporek et al., 2009; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], n.d.).

#### **Institutional Level**

**Barrier:** Within workplaces and educational institutions, systemic barriers persist, including limited neurodiversity awareness, inadequate accommodations, and biased hiring practices.

Many employers lack the knowledge to create accessible application processes, flexible work environments, or sensory friendly spaces. Career development programs also often fail to adapt training methods to support neurodivergent individuals, focusing on perceived limitations rather than recognizing diverse strengths.

**Action:** Counselors can advocate for neurodiversity training and inclusive hiring practices within

organizations. Training staff and leadership to understand neurodiversity reduces stigma, increases cultural competence, and promotes humility and inclusion. Counselors can collaborate with employers to design educational sessions, model inclusive communication, and highlight the strengths and creativity neurodivergent employees contribute to the workplace. They can also assist employers in developing accommodations that benefit all employees (Toporek et al., 2009).

### **Community Level**

**Barrier:** At the community level, stigma and misunderstanding about neurodivergence remain significant challenges. Employers, families, and even service providers may hold outdated beliefs about what neurodivergent individuals can achieve. Community resources such as vocational rehabilitation programs are often underfunded, have long waitlists, or lack adequately trained staff to provide effective support. In addition, limited collaboration among schools, local businesses, and mental health professionals reduces opportunities for transition to work and long-term stability.

**Action:** Counselors can help build partnerships among schools, mental health providers, and employers to establish transition to work initiatives such as Project SEARCH and community based job coaching programs. These collaborative efforts bridge service gaps and provide structured opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to gain work experience, self confidence, and independence. Partnerships also promote inclusion, shared responsibility, and the prevention of long-term unemployment (Murray & Crowe, 2016; SAMHSA, n.d.).

### **Public Policy Level**

**Barrier:** Despite protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and state

employment initiatives, gaps remain in enforcing equitable employment policies for neurodivergent individuals. Ongoing barriers include limited funding for inclusive workforce programs, minimal accountability for employers who fail to provide accommodations, few incentives for hiring neurodivergent workers, and inconsistent data collection that obscures employment disparities.

**Action:** Counselors can support and advocate for legislation that expands funding for inclusive employment programs and strengthens enforcement of workplace accommodation laws.

Advocacy can occur through professional organizations, legislative outreach, and participation in disability inclusion campaigns. Policy level advocacy not only enhances employment access but also promotes public health by reducing social isolation and economic inequity (Murray & Crowe, 2016; SAMHSA, n.d.).

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