



Applied
Self-Direction

Core Standards for Information & Assistance Professionals in Self-Direction

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Introduction

This resource is designed to provide information to states, managed care organizations, and other stakeholders regarding core competencies and skills for professionals providing Information and Assistance (I&A) in support of self-direction. I&A is essential for helping participants understand self-direction, navigate their program and its rules, and have a successful experience self-directing. An underpowered I&A function can limit not only a program's growth and participant satisfaction, but also its integrity, as one of the core functions of I&A is to provide additional program monitoring and safeguards.

The I&A function is unique to self-direction. It does not duplicate case management, although it may overlap with a case manager's role or even be provided exclusively by case managers, depending on a program's design.¹ I&A may also overlap with the Financial Management Services (FMS) function—for example, providing information to participants about program rules and requirements. In some states, I&A may be provided exclusively by the FMS entity. For more background about the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to I&A program design, see the companion report to this resource, [Strengthening Information and Assistance in Self-Direction Programs: Executive Table Roundtable Series White Paper](#).

All too often, qualifications and requirements for I&A professionals are minimal. For example, a waiver may simply require a support broker to be at least 18 years of age, pass a criminal background check, and have a particular number of years' experience working with people with disabilities. While experience is beneficial, these requirements do not necessarily mean a provider has the ability to offer high-quality I&A. Alternatively, I&A provider qualifications may require passing a training course, but the training course may offer little to no information about the philosophical underpinnings of the self-direction model, or about authentic person-centered planning or self-determination.

This resource offers recommendations about what characteristics and core competencies we believe to be hallmarks of a professional who offers high-quality I&A. It also offers recommendations about what an I&A professional should do, should know, and how their work fits into a larger program ecosystem. These recommendations are designed so as to be applicable regardless of where the I&A function "lives" in a program—for example, whether I&A is offered through agency-based support brokerage, as part of case management, or through an independent support broker model.

¹ See p.188, [Application for a 1915\(c\) Home and Community-Based Waiver](#)

These recommendations were developed after conducting a series of roundtables with national expert practitioners and thought leaders in I&A. Lessons learned from years of technical assistance activities with states and managed care organizations have also been incorporated.

These recommendations are not intended to be comprehensive, nor are most requirements necessarily set in stone. However, they were designed holistically, with the recognition that providing I&A requires a deep philosophical commitment to the self-direction model as much as it requires technical expertise. At their core, these recommendations are designed to offer answers to the following questions:

- What should an I&A professional *know* to help them successfully support participants?
- What should an I&A professional *do* to help them successfully support participants?
- What abilities and resources should an I&A professional have to help successfully support participants?
- How can states and other program administrative entities gauge the success of their I&A professionals?

We hope this resource provides a foundation on which program stakeholders can collaboratively build an I&A structure that best meets their needs.

Recommended Qualifications and Characteristics for Prospective I&A Professionals

This section includes practical qualifications as well as characteristics that are critical for any prospective I&A professional. States are encouraged to consider these when developing I&A provider qualifications.

Note: Educational requirements were intentionally not included in the suggested qualifications. Many states have instituted educational requirements for I&A professionals, such as a four-year degree in human services or a related field. An education requirement was not included because it can potentially disqualify candidates who otherwise have the interest and skill set to provide high-quality I&A.

Suggested Minimum Qualifications

- Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must be able to pass criminal background check and any other checks required by program
- At least 1 year of experience (paid or unpaid) working with or having lived experience as a member of a marginalized population, including but not limited to

people with disabilities, people of color, people experiencing homelessness, and people with involvement in the justice system

- Cannot also serve as a representative or paid worker for the participant due to conflict of interest
- Must not have a conflict of interest according to the rules of the program
- Familiarity with using common technology, such as a smartphone, plus basic spreadsheet, email, and word processing software
- Must be able to pass any state-mandated training for I&A professionals

Philosophical Hallmarks of a High-Quality I&A Professional

- Belief that anyone who wants to manage and direct their own services can do so with the right supports
- Demonstrated commitment to ensuring people have control of their own lives
- Demonstrated commitment to support people's opportunities to live meaningful lives as valued citizens in their community
- Knowledge of social inequities and their effects on individuals
- Knowledge of human behavior, dynamics of groups, interpersonal relations, conflict management, negotiation, and social interaction
- Cultural awareness to be able to work successfully with participants of diverse backgrounds

Necessary Skills for I&A Professionals

- Strong and effective oral and written communication skills
- Strong problem-solving skills, including critical thinking, ability to facilitate discussions among members of a participant's circle of support, and the ability to think creatively
- Ability to model strong advocacy techniques and strategies for the participant
- Ability to support the participant with deciding what services and supports best meet their needs and support their goals
- Analytical and math skills to assist with spending plan and budget development, depending on the program (e.g., in programs with budget authority)
- Ability to delegate tasks appropriately and according to scope or program role
- Ability to be accountable and dependable for the participant
- Excellent time management and prioritization skills to focus on multiple projects simultaneously and adapt to change
- Ability to work independently with minimal supervision
- Must be detail-oriented and willing to engage with technical program rules and requirements
- Ability to meet documentation standards

- Ability to adapt to different types of conversations (e.g., to move from professional to conversational tone)
- Ability to attend in-person meetings with the participant or others as necessary

Core Competencies for I&A Professionals

This section includes knowledge and skills that I&A professionals should possess in order to provide high-quality services. These competencies can be taught upon hiring through training and developed through mentoring. I&A professionals should receive ongoing support to cultivate and strengthen these competencies.

- In-depth understanding of the philosophy and operations of self-direction, including roles and responsibilities
- In-depth understanding of authentic person-centered planning and the principles of self-determination
- Thorough knowledge and understanding of additional resources available to the participant to support the person-centered plan
- In-depth knowledge of program rules and regulations
- In-depth knowledge of program forms and resources
- Comprehensive understanding of the key players in the program and the roles each person plays
- Ability to support the participant in identifying preferred outcomes and the steps necessary to achieve those outcomes
- Ability to effectively communicate with participants and educate as needed
- Strong desire to consistently pursue learning to assist the participant more effectively, for example, engaging with new resources, learning about program changes and additions, etc.

Recommended Strategies for Effectively Training I&A Professionals & Participants About Self-Direction

A state, managed care organization, and/or other program administrative entity can help ensure I&A quality by developing resources that are useful for I&A professionals. Such resources can also potentially be helpful for participants and families. Possible resources that can enhance I&A quality are suggested below.

States, managed care organizations, and/or other program administrative entities are encouraged to consider:

- How to explain and promote self-direction in a way that avoids gatekeeping or preventing anyone interested from trying self-direction

- How to recognize and understand bias to ensure it avoids intentionally or unintentionally swaying a participant’s decisions
- A robust experiential component, such as role-playing common conversations and problem solving between a participant and an I&A professional
- Strategies for identifying when and if a conflict of interest exists
- Strategies to promote greater inclusion and access to self-direction, including guidance on providing culturally competent services to a diverse group of participants
- Creating a standardized way to share information on self-direction, such as through a video, to participants to ensure all participants, regardless of the I&A professional they work with, receive the same basic information about self-direction. Other potential approaches include a script or brochure.
 - In addition to program details, the standardized information should include:
 - Making clear that I&A is available to support to the participant
 - Other supports, including FMS, are available to support a successful experience in self-direction
 - The option for participants to appoint someone they know and trust, often known as a representative or a surrogate, that can manage some or all of the employer tasks
- Providing an assurance that the participant was provided introductory information about self-direction at a minimum by having a checklist that the participant checks off and signs

Recommendations for Ensuring I&A Professionals Provide Robust Monitoring and Oversight

I&A also serves as a program safeguard that is critical to help detect and prevent potential problems, including fraud, waste, and abuse. I&A professionals educate participants on program rules and requirements to help ensure spending aligns with program rules and requirements. They also review utilization reports to check that participants are using their allocated resources in an effective way, and can follow up in the event of overutilization or underutilization.

I&A professionals should receive training on the following topics prior to beginning their respective roles with self-direction. Subsequently, I&A professionals will convey this information to the participants they serve.

Fraud, waste, and financial abuse

- Role of the I&A professional and the participant in mandated reporting
- The definitions of and reporting requirements for fraud, waste, and financial abuse

- How the employee records their time and how the employer verifies the time is accurate
- The difference between intentional and unintentional fraud and how to respond to each
- Rules for allowable and non-allowable goods and services purchases (if permitted by the program)
- How to review and monitor the participant's spending reports and follow up on concerns with the appropriate party
- How to appropriately respond to participant questions regarding the electronic visit verification (EVV) system
- Understand the role of the FMS entity in identifying and preventing fraud, waste, and abuse

Abuse, neglect, exploitation, and health and safety

- The definitions of and reporting requirements for abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- Knowing the signs of abuse, neglect, and exploitation and how to respond
- Roles that the I&A professional and participant have in mandated reporting
- Understanding the dignity of risk and when or if a risk agreement is needed
- Identifying safeguards that are implemented to ensure abuse, neglect, exploitation and health and safety needs are addressed
- The importance of adjusting the plan to accommodate health and safety issues that arise
- Strategies for developing backup plans

In order to provide effective ongoing program monitoring, the I&A professional should have sufficient knowledge of the participant's plan and their support system to identify an issue. When an issue is identified, the I&A professional should:

- Maintain objectivity and open-mindedness
- Address the issue by asking questions to get more information
- Retrain the participant, when necessary
- Report the issue according to program rules

Recommended Strategies to Ensure Quality Services are Provided by I&A Professionals

It is not uncommon for states to design an I&A function for self-direction prior to program launch, but neglect to develop a plan to provide ongoing oversight for this key function. A state, managed care organization, and/or other program administrative entity will need to implement continuing strategies to ensure I&A professionals are effective in their role and are providing quality services.

Suggested Strategies to Measure I&A Professional Performance

- Distribute I&A satisfaction surveys to participants
- Compare metrics to detect potential outliers across the pool of I&A professionals that may (though not necessarily) indicate issues with I&A quality, such as:
 - I&A professionals with higher rates of participants terminating self-direction
 - I&A professionals with higher rates of participants under investigation for fraud
 - I&A professionals with larger numbers of participants consistently making errors in the EVV system
 - I&A professionals who have higher rates of people meeting or exceeding preferred outcomes and goals identified in the person-centered plan
 - I&A professionals who have a large number of people “successfully” self-directing (e.g., reporting high rates of satisfaction)
- Conduct quality calls with participants and act on feedback
- Host a webpage that allows participants to rate the I&A professionals across various areas, in order to create a “scorecard” for I&A professionals

It is important to retain effective I&A professionals, as participants will do best with minimal turnover in their I&A support. Key retention strategies include:

- Competitive pay
- Reasonable workloads
- Paired with a reasonable number of participants to support (see recommendations below)
- Assigned to exclusively serve self-directing participants, as opposed to a mix of clients utilizing self-direction and traditional services, so one mission can be focused on

Recommendations for I&A Professionals to Evaluate Quality of Their Services

In addition to oversight by the state and/or managed care organization, I&A professionals should conduct their own quality monitoring to ensure the services they provide to participants are adequate and effective. This process will serve to strengthen the I&A professional’s expertise and effectiveness over time.

Suggested Strategies for I&A Professionals to Implement for Quality Monitoring

- Request a self-assessment tool from the state oversight agency
- Distribute satisfaction surveys
- Conduct participant satisfaction calls and act on feedback
- Analyze whether person-centered outcomes and goals are being met
- Analyze success in the program. Variables to track may include:

- Timecard/EVV errors
- Fraud investigations
- Problems with hiring workers
- Health and safety of the participant is being achieved. Indicators may include:
 - The participant is well-groomed, in relation to what the participant desires, when the I&A professional visits the participant
 - The home is clean, in relation to what the participant desires, when the I&A professional comes to visit the participant
 - The participant has not had unexplained falls or injuries
 - The home is free of health and safety concerns, in relation to participant abilities, when the I&A professional comes to visit the participant. Indicators may include:
 - There is food in the participant’s home
 - There are not bugs or other pests in the participant’s home
 - Mobility hazards are removed

Recommendations on the Number of Participants an I&A Professional Can Successfully Assist

There is no “magic number” of participants any one I&A professional can successfully support. Drawing upon the recommendations of numerous experts and national technical assistance experience, the preferred number of participants served is commonly reported to be in the range of 35-45 people. However, this number may not be appropriate in all programs.

The actual number in any given program will depend on many factors, including:

- The experience and knowledge of the I&A professional
- The amount of support the I&A professional is expected to provide
- The experience and knowledge of the participant and where they are in the self-direction journey
- The current needs of the participant
- If the I&A professional serves people exclusively in self-direction or if they handle other tasks and/or programs as well

Identifying Best Practices for Ensuring Continuity of I&A Services in the Event of a Disaster

The COVID pandemic has forced participants and their supports, including I&A professionals, to think more proactively about what should happen in an emergency. Best practices for preparedness will vary depending on the type of emergency the participant is likely to face given the area in which they live—e.g., wildfires in California vs. tornadoes

in Texas. Regardless of the type of emergency, states and managed care organizations should have policies and procedures in place to ensure ongoing access to I&A support, particularly when it may be needed most.

Suggested Disaster Preparedness Strategies

- Allow virtual appointments and check-ins
- As permitted by the program, I&A professionals should proactively remind participants of any flexibility with spending for goods and services to cover supplies or services that are needed to prepare in advance of a disaster, particularly pertaining to the participant's specific disability. For example, a participant who is technology-dependent may wish to purchase a backup generator in the event of unexpected power outages.
- As permitted by the program, I&A professionals should proactively remind participants of any flexibility with spending to cover supplies or services that are needed when a disaster occurs. For instance, a participant may choose to move day services dollars to a home care service category when day services are closed due to a natural disaster and more home care hours are needed.
- Ensure the participant has an emergency plan in place that takes into account local risks
- Review and update the emergency plan to ensure it is accurate when needed
- Practice and review the emergency plan, so it is familiar when the need arises
- Check in more often with the participant during an emergency

Conclusion

The success of a self-direction program hinges, in part, upon the quality of the services provided by competent, caring I&A professionals. While states will vary in their approach to self-direction and I&A design, there are certain core standards for I&A professionals that are applicable nationwide. While this resource represents a compilation of many of these key best practices, it is not intended to be all-encompassing and should be adapted as needed on a case-by-case basis.

Applied Self-Direction is available to provide additional support to states, managed care organizations, and other relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of the I&A function in self-direction. We invite you to share your follow up questions, suggestions, and concerns with us at info@appliedselfdirection.com.