RRTC-EBP VR
Rehabilitation Research & Training Center
for Evidence Based Practice in Vocational Rehabilitation

Phase II Findings: Models of Effective Practice, Policy, and Procedures

A purpose of this study was to discover emerging and promising vocational rehabilitation (VR) service delivery practices that help improve employment outcomes of people with disabilities who receive services from the state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) system. Four high performing state VR agencies (Maryland, Mississippi, Texas, and Utah) were selected for study based on annual adjusted rehabilitation rates and other indicators that demonstrated they had developed effective models of delivering services that set them apart in performance from other state agencies. In looking at these states the question was asked, **"What are the best models of effective practice, policy, and procedures among state VR agencies that result in the creation of an environment that promotes innovation and the effective delivery of services to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve employment outcomes?"**

Multiple characteristics were noted across organizational levels within each state agency for senior managers, mid-level managers and selected counselors and other staff involved with the agency's innovations and best practices. Below is a summary of the characteristics that appeared at each organizational level, including characteristics unique to individual agencies.

Common Agency Characteristics

Culture - Effecting organizational cultural change is necessary to make substantial changes in agency operations and service delivery practices enhancing service quality and employment outcomes for customers. This includes the notion of trying to instill, "a culture of critical and smart thinking before you do." One agency identified a Transformational Agenda, described as the development and promotion of an agency culture that would allow best practices to be adopted and innovation to occur. Culture is also considered an environment where all staff are "very encouraged to be creative, be visionary to deliver VR message, goals and mission."

Leadership - Agency Leaders were keenly aware of their response to innovative ideas brought forward and demonstrated support for agency staff. Credit was given to agency leaders for instituting organizational changes leading to a less bureaucratic and more flexible responsive agency. Counselors/staff appreciate the accessibility of agency leaders. Agency leader continuity was also recognized as an important element of sustainability for agency success.

Support for Innovative Practice and Promising Practices - Agency leaders encourage and support innovative ideas throughout all levels in the organization. Leaders encourage communication and autonomy and are open to ideas from staff. Promising practices include the Acquired Brain Injury program, Social Security Benefits Counseling, Individual Placement and Supports, rapid response and closely coordinated services, and a Seamless Transition Collaborative program Collaboration with community partners, as well as requiring field staff to be heavily involved with service providers through constant contact and communication, were viewed as the foundations for successful innovative ventures.

Partnerships - Agency staff value relationships with all partners including businesses, employers, and community rehabilitation programs. The agency works closely with all three groups to ensure that each groups needs are met through collaborative working relationships and seamless service delivery. Inter- and intra-agency partnerships are considered a critical component of service provision.

Staff Training & Development - A highly trained staff is essential to achieve a working alliance and provide professional services. Training in specific targeted populations such as blindness, deafness, autism, transitioning youth, and multicultural counseling are practices aimed at enhancing service delivery and employment outcomes for agency customers. Training is not limited to that which is necessary to successfully complete job tasks; rather, counselors are encouraged "to look for opportunities of personal growth and advancement."

Working Alliance & Client-Centered Services - The Working Alliance and Client-Centered services was used as a proxy for focusing the program on professionalism in rehabilitation counseling services. It was implied that rehabilitation counselors should perform their duties with deference to the counselor role over that of the case manager role inherent in the position. Counselors' statements reflected a feeling of being connected to the counseling component of rehabilitation counseling. Client-centered services incorporate the holistic view of clients into rehabilitation planning, rather than being limited to a tightly focused view of functional abilities and mechanical job placement. Client self-actualization is viewed as equally important as employment for case outcome.

Unique Agency Characteristics

Return on Investment - Marketing the benefits of services and the return on investment to state policy makers has demonstrated the value of services in measurable terms to both internal and external stakeholders. One agency has been able to stabilize and expand the scope of this program over time.

Service Integration and Business Model of "Structure, Sales & Service" - Service Integration/Coordination focuses on providing, when feasible and productive, services directly to clients rather than relying on referrals to external agencies. One agency incorporates a Business Model that consists of 1) Structure (agency is its own state department; 501c3 embedded; provides flexibility), 2) Service (high quality; client first; focus on outcomes), and 3) Sales (maintaining relationships with legislators, employers, partners, public).

Increasing Visibility and Communication/Constituent Relations - The focus is on increasing awareness of the vocational rehabilitation program, the people served, and the benefits of services to both individuals with disabilities and the community. One agency viewed activities under this domain as critical to their ongoing efforts to secure community support for the program, engage partners in a dialogue regarding joint services, and communicate effectively with the state legislature to preserve, and ultimately expand, funding for the program. Another agency views communication as critical interaction at all levels of the agency and the public. It operates an Office of Communications and Constituent Relations specifically designated to address questions and requests from legislators and assist with public relations campaigns.

Rehabilitation Counselor and Unit Autonomy - Agency staff has the flexibility to meet the service needs of an individual client and district offices may alter services to meet the needs of the surrounding communities. Agency leaders strive to provide district managers, supervisors, and counselors with the flexibility (within a specified framework) to adapt to the challenges of services provision in a given area or with a particular client.

Comprehensive Service Provision - One agency provides counselors with the ability to refer internally for a range of different services which supported the feeling of inter-agency partnerships and providing services based on individual client needs. Counselors can refer to an array of services (i.e., benefits counseling and assessment are seen as essential components in developing and achieving rehabilitation plans).

Resources - Agency leaders are committed to acquiring, developing, and disseminating resources as needed for field operations. Resource management includes exploring novel ways to fund programs, such as the "braided" funding for Individual Placement and Support and supported employment services in conjunction with the state mental health authority. Other funding opportunities included grants for transition programming and setting aside funds for successful innovative programs.