



## ***A Profile of Vocational Rehabilitation Interagency Activity Improving Supported Employment for People with Severe Disabilities***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at Children's Hospital in Boston is conducting three companion studies to investigate the extent of interagency activity among state agencies that deliver or fund employment services. This paper presents findings from the first study, completed in December 1998, that examined the use of state level interagency agreements and their impact upon supported employment. Interagency agreements were most frequent with state agencies that specialized in or had substantial involvement with disability services including the state mental health agency (MH), the state mental retardation and developmental disabilities (MR/DD) agency, and the state department of education (DOE). These agreements were also seen as having a more positive impact on employment opportunities than agreements with other types of agencies. Agencies that typically provide employment services to the general population were as likely or more likely to be participating in informal interagency activity than written state level interagency agreements. The impact of these agreements in encouraging supported employment varied by type of agency. The MH and MR/DD agency agreements with the VR agency were rated as having the highest impact while the agreements between the One-Stop Career Centers and the VR agency were rated as having no impact: positive or negative.

Over the past 15 years, there have been substantial changes in the delivery and funding of day and employment services for individuals with disabilities. Most notably, the introduction of supported employment has led to a dramatic increase in the number of individuals with severe disabilities in integrated community employment. State Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD) agencies report that the number of individuals supported in integrated employment increased from 32,471 to 98,315 between FY 1988 and FY 1996, and the percent of individuals with developmental disabilities closed into integrated employment by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies increased from 74% in FY 1985 to 86% in FY 1995 (Butterworth, Gilmore, Kiernan & Schalock, in press; Butterworth, Gilmore & Schalock, 1998). Similarly, Wehman, Revell, and Kregel (1998) report national participation in supported employment across disability groups increasing from 10,000 individuals in FY 1986 to almost 140,000 in FY 1995.

Despite these promising changes, the implementation of supported employment has not fully lived up to its expectations. Early expectations for the initiative were that programs would transfer resources and services from facility-based services to integrated employment. The National Survey of MR/DD agencies found, in FY 1996, 77% of those served in all day and employment programs participated in sheltered employment or non-work programs. Data from state MR/DD agencies suggests that while the number of people in integrated employment has increased, the number in facility-based or non-work programs has also increased (Butterworth et al., in press). These results suggest that integrated employment services, especially supported employment, are being viewed as an add-on service by community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). West, Revell, & Wehman, (1998) found 37% of CRPs ran both facility-based services and supported employment

reported converting resources to integrated employment. The remaining 63% maintained or increased their investment in facility-based services. West et al. (1998) also found that supported employment staff remained a minority, on average only 11%, of an organization's total staff. On a state level, there is considerable variability in supported employment rates. The percent of individuals served in integrated employment by MR/DD agencies, for example, varied from 4% to 60% in FY 1996 (Butterworth et al. in press).

Identifying factors that differentiate state level employment outcomes will contribute to more effective systems level change. One factor often emphasized in systems change is the role of interagency collaboration and agreements in focusing and maximizing resources. State agency collaboration in the delivery of supported employment services may lead to the expansion of these services (Nebraska Department of Education, 1997; Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, 1997). Interagency agreements also may be a tool for systems change (Nebraska Department of Education, 1997) as well as a mechanism for local service delivery collaboration (Rogers, Anthony, & Danley, 1989).

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at Children's Hospital in Boston is conducting three companion studies to investigate the extent of interagency activity among state agencies that deliver or fund employment services. The first study, completed in December 1998, examines the use of state level interagency agreements and their impact upon supported employment. VR program managers at the central office were asked to identify interagency agreements and informal activity between the VR and other state agencies. They were asked to nominate agreements that encouraged supported employment opportunities for people with significant disabilities. The second study will analyze agreements nominated as encouraging supported employ-

ment. During the Spring of 1999, the study will interview key informants and explore the relationship of an agreement to practice. The last study, implemented in the Fall of 1999, is a survey of local VR administrators on interagency activity. This brief report describes the first study's findings.



## METHOD

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**Sample:** Supported employment program managers in the 50 states, and 4 territories including Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and the Pacific Islands were the sample. Program managers in the central were personnel from the central office of the state VR agency. Forty-one of the 70 program managers working for the commissions for the Blind or the general VR agency responded.

**Instruments:** The survey was the FY 1997 wave of a longitudinal data collection effort begun in FY 1986 and lead by the Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC). The RRTC conducts an annual survey which collects information about the numbers of individuals served in supported employment programs, numbers served by types of supported employment models, numbers served by disability category and mental retardation level, wages, funding sources, authorized providers, strategies, and types of rate structures. Interagency agreement questions were developed as a module which was included in the survey for the purpose of identifying the existence of interagency agreements and to gather nominations for highly effective agreements.

Participants were asked about the presence of interagency activity between the VR agency and fourteen other state agencies or programs. Table 1 on the following page lists the state agencies and programs. Respondents were

asked to identify what type of interagency agreement was in existence and, if present, to what extent a state level written agreement influenced opportunities for supported employment. Two additional questions addressed other types of interagency activity. Program managers were asked to identify any standing or ad hoc groups related to interagency activity, and whether or not the VR agency designated a staff liaison to other state agencies.

**Procedure:** The survey was mailed to respondents in the Spring of 1998 who were then contacted to confirm receipt of the survey. Follow-up phone calls reminded respondents to return the survey, clarified any questions arising from the returned surveys, and requested copies of nominated interagency agreements.

## FINDINGS

### PRESENCE OF INTERAGENCY ACTIVITY

Table 1 below shows how many VR program managers reported interagency activity with the specified list of state agencies or entities across three levels of activity. The levels of activity include: presence of a state level written interagency agreement, presence of a local level written interagency agreement, and presence of informal interagency activity. Respondents could report interagency activity with an agency in one or all three categories. Therefore, some respondents reported multiple types of interagency activity per state agency.

**TABLE 1 -- INTERAGENCY ACTIVITY BETWEEN VR STATE AGENCY AND OTHER STATE AGENCIES (N = 41)**

STATE AGENCY OR ENTITY	N <sup>1</sup> STATES	NUMBER OF VR STATE AGENCIES <sup>2</sup>		
		State Agreement	Local Agreement	Informal Activity
<b>Block 1:</b>				
Mental Health Agency	31	26	9	10
Mental Retardation Agency	28	23	7	13
Education and School-to-Work	26	22	8	9
<b>Block 2:</b>				
Welfare Agency	15	8	2	9
One-Stop Career Center	14	8	2	10
Employment and Training	14	8	2	8
Children Youth and Family	12	7	2	7
Social Security	15	6	0	10
<b>Block 3:</b>				
Corrections	9	5	0	4
Veterans Administration	5	5	0	3
Department of Public Health	7	3	1	3
Drug and Alcohol Programs	7	2	2	5
Health Care Centers/Hosp.	4	2	0	3

<sup>1</sup>Reporting any interagency activity, 37 states plus Puerto Rico, CT, NC, and TX have multiple VR agencies responding.

<sup>2</sup>These columns are not additive. Many VR agencies reported multiple levels of interagency activity.

The list of agencies or entities were sorted into three blocks. The first block includes agencies that have a high level of interagency activity with VR across the three categories. The second block includes agencies that informal interagency activity was reported more frequently or equally as formal written interagency activity. Overall, interagency activity was reported less often for this group than for group one. The third block consists of agencies with relatively little or no reported interagency activity with the VR system.

The state mental health (MH) agency, MR/DD agency, and the department of education (DOE) were the agencies reported to have the most state level and local written interagency agreements, and informal interagency activity with the VR system. These agencies provide services to people with disabilities or, in the case of the DOE, have substantial involvement in the disability services system. Formal written interagency agreements are common between each of these agencies and the VR agency.

The next two blocks of agencies or programs include a wide range of services. Program managers reported a few more interagency agreements or activity in this grouping than in the last. These agencies included the welfare agency, One-Stop Career Centers, Employment and Training, Children, Youth, and Family Services, and the local Social Security Administration. Most of these agencies or entities operate, fund, or are involved in employment services programs typically provided to job-seekers or people receiving TANF benefits. VR supported employment program managers reported more frequent informal activity than state level interagency agreements for three out of five agencies in the block. Ten respondents reported informal interagency activity with the One-Stop Career Center and eight reported state level written interagency agreement. This was true for the state welfare agency and the state or local office of the Social Security Administration. Few respondents re-

ported interagency activity between the VR and agencies or programs in the last block. Aside from Corrections, these agencies or programs offer medical services to specialized populations.

Seven of the forty-one respondents reported no interagency agreements with any state agency and little, if no, informal interagency activity with any state agency. Four of these respondents were from the state commissions for the blind. Of the three others, one respondent's state has a highly consolidated service system. The VR agency, the MR/DD, the MH, and the welfare program all operating under one state agency.

### **IMPACT ON SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT**

Respondents were asked to rate how effective the state-level written interagency agreement was in promoting integrated employment for people with severe disabilities. The possible choices ranged from strongly encourages to strongly discourages supported employment. A score of 3 indicates no impact positive or negative. Higher scores indicate more positive impact.

Table 2 on the following page displays the state agencies by impact in descending order. State MR/DD and State MH agency interagency agreements with the VR agency were reported to have the strongest impact on integrated employment for people with severe disabilities. Drug and alcohol programs is also listed in the top three, although this should be interpreted with caution. Only two respondents reported an interagency agreement with this state service.

Interagency agreements with the majority of state agencies or programs have a slight impact on supported employment. In most instances, few agreements exist between these agencies and the state VR agency. Interagency agreements between VR agencies and the One-Stop Career Centers were rated as having no impact, positive or negative, in improving integrated employment for people with severe disabilities.

**TABLE 2 -- PERCEIVED IMPACT OF INTERAGENCY ACTIVITY: IMPACT OF INTER-AGENCY ACTIVITY UPON SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT (N = 41 VR AGENCIES)**

STATE AGENCY OR ENTITY	N STATES REPORTING	PERCEIVED IMPACT	RANK
Mental Retardation Agency	22	4.35	1
Mental Health Agency	25	4.08	2
Drug and Alcohol Programs	2	4.00	3
Children Youth and Family	7	3.86	4
Corrections	5	3.80	5
Secondary Education	4	3.67	6
Department of Public Health	3	3.67	6
Education (including School-to-Work)	22	3.61	7
Employment and Training	8	3.57	8
Health Care Centers/Hospitals	2	3.50	9
Welfare	8	3.38	9
Social Security	6	3.33	10
One-Stop Career Center	8	3.00	11
Veterans Administration	5	3.00	11

37 states plus Puerto Rico, CT, NC, and TX have multiple VR agencies in the respondent pool including the Commissions for the Blind.

### INTERAGENCY WORKING GROUPS

Of the 41 respondents, 26 reported the presence of interagency working groups in which the VR agency has a designated staff person present. Tables 3-5 on the following pages, list the working groups, their function, and agencies represented by state. The function of the working groups range from statewide service planning and policy setting to local service delivery. Several working groups emphasize systems change in the area of employment or supported employment, in particular.

### VR STAFF DESIGNATED AS INTERAGENCY LIAISON

Eighteen respondents indicated that the VR agency has a staff person designated to interagency work. Eleven of the 18 respondents are that designee.

### DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Formal interagency activity defined as written interagency agreements is most frequent



**TABLE 3 -- INTERAGENCY WORKING GROUPS: STATEWIDE GROUPS WITH POLICY FOCUS OR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

STATE	WORK GROUP	FUNCTION	REPRESENTATION BY
AZ	Employment Related and Extended Employment	Policy and quality outcomes	CRPs, VR, multiple agencies
DE	MR/VR Work Groups	State policy and procedures	VR, MR
FL	Work Group	TA and policy	VR, 20 state agencies
IL	SEP Work Group	Redesign day services	VR, MH
KY	Employment Initiatives	SE expansion/conversion	
MA	Employment Services Action Counsel	Advise executive office	multiple state agencies
	Flexible Finance	Interagency funding	VR,MR/DD,MH, ED
NC	ADVP - Adhoc	Extended Services Rate Setting	MH, VR, CRP
OK	SSA Agreement	Oversee Agreement	PH, MH, VR
PA	Employment Oversight	Advisory for the ARC	all SE funding agencies
	MR Multiple Year Plan	Develop SE Strategies	VR, MH, MR, CRP
TX	Interagency Work Group	System Change Project	VR, MH, MR/DD, ED, VR/B
VT	State SE Team	Systems Planning	VR, MY, ED

CRP = Community Rehabilitation Provider; DDC = Development Disabilities Council; ED = Education; MH = Mental Health; MR/DD = Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability; PH = Public Health; SE = Supported Employment; VR = Vocational Rehabilitation; VR/B = Vocational Rehabilitation Commission for the Blind

between the VR agency and the state agencies providing services to people with disabilities. Agencies defined as partners in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 tend to have fewer written interagency agreements with the VR agency and relatively low impact on encouraging supported employment opportunities. This is particularly true for the agreements between the VR agency and the One-Stop Career Centers in the state.

Supported employment program managers at the state VR agency reported informal interagency activity with a variety of agencies. In this survey, local level interagency activity is likely to be under-reported as the respondents were central office personnel and may not be familiar with local collaboration. Regardless, informal interagency activity is more frequent among the workforce investment partners than formal written agreements. One explanation



**TABLE 4 -- INTERAGENCY WORKING GROUPS: STATEWIDE GROUPS WITH RESTRUCTURING OR SERVICE FOCUS**

STATE	WORK GROUP	FUNCTION	AGENCIES REPRESENTED
ID	Work Group	Provide collaboration	CRP, MR/DD, CAP
LA	Transition Core Teams	Coordinate systems	VR, multi-service, ED
MD	Interagency Transition	SE implementation	MH, SPED, MR/DD, VR, Gov
MS	State Case Teams	Youth with emotional/behavioral disabilities	AG, MH, HS, ED, PH, M/A, VR
NC	Vocational Alternatives	Extended services	VR, MH, MR/DD
	Dual Diagnosis	Enhance SE	VR, MH
OK	VR/DD Work Group	General collaboration	VR, MR/DD
UT	New Futures SE	Improve SE	VR, Ed, MR/DD, MH
VT	Core Transition Team	Interagency Partnership	MH, VR
WA	SE Program	Evaluate proviso	VR, MR/DD, MH
	Evaluation	Activity	DDA
WI	Hi-Impact	Cooperative Project	VR, MR/DD
	Transition	Various models of SE	VR, PI
	Mental Health	Various models of SE	VR, DSL

CAP = Client Assistance program; DDA = Division of Data Analysis; DSL = Division of Supportive Living; ED = Education; Gov = Governor's Office; HS = Human Services; M/A = Medicaid; MH = Mental Health; MR/DD = Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability; PH = Public Health; PI = Public Institutions; PWD = People with Disabilities; SE = Supported Employment; SPED = Special Education; VR = Vocational Rehabilitation

for the low impact of formal written agreements with One-Stop Career Centers is that there is less experience with interagency agreements between these two entities. Another explanation is that central office VR personnel may not be aware of local interagency agreements between the local office of the state VR agency and One-Stop Career Centers. Given the

importance of interagency agreements with these two entities as defined in the WIA of 1998, this finding should be explored further at a more local level.

Interagency agreements are one form of interagency activity. Many states have working groups whose members represent a range of constituents with a vested interest in



**TABLE 5 -- INTERAGENCY WORK GROUPS: LOCAL WORK GROUPS**

STATE	WORK GROUP	FUNCTION	AGENCIES REPRESENTED
CT	Local Meetings	Consumer/Agency Relations	VR, MR
DE	County SE Committees	Oversight/Advisory	VR, MH, MR
KY	Local SE Teams	Local level planning	VR and other agencies
NH	Alternative Funding	Develop alternative funding	Local disability agencies
WY	Local Business Advisor	Create SE job opportunities	Public social service agencies, private sector employers, VR

MH = Mental Health; MR = Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability; VR = Vocational Rehabilitation

employment opportunities for people with disabilities. These groups function as statewide policy and oversight bodies to locally based service enhancement groups. The VR representative is often the supported employment program manager. Membership and partner agencies in the workgroups are predominately disability specific agencies including the state MH agency and the state MR/DD agency. Many groups also included community rehabilitation providers, advocacy groups, and employer groups.

Little is known about the impact of these groups upon increasing supported employment. Most target their activities toward improving employment services through policy and planning or service delivery. It is likely that the working groups have significant impact upon employment outcomes for people with disabilities within their state or locality. Interestingly, One-Stop Career Centers, state welfare agencies, and employment and training service agencies are not frequent participants. This also may change given the requirements of the WIA which mandate the creation of state and local workforce boards respon-

sible for oversight and planning of employment services. Existing working groups should consider their role in participating in or coordinating activities with the WIA workforce boards.

Future research should address the range of interagency activity and determine which types are related to better employment outcomes. Research activities should explore the particular contextual and implementation factors of interagency agreements that encourage supported employment service delivery. What is the link between written agreements and local practice? What is the form of local interagency activity? Two current ICI studies will focus upon interagency activity and local practice. One study examines policy issues and employment service delivery from the perspective of the MR/DD local office administrator and case manager. The other study examines interagency collaboration from the perspective of the VR agency local office administrator. Information about the link between various interagency activities and outcomes will provide multiple policy tools to advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities.



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