One-year Follow-up of Illinois State Vocational Rehabilitation Clients with Psychiatric Disabilities following Successful Closure into Community Employment


Article Summary

Despite increases in competitive employment for individuals with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy between 1985 and 1995, the author states that the federal-state vocational rehabilitation (VR) system has failed to adequately serve individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Cook cites studies that show fewer rehabilitation dollars being spent, returns to competitive employment, and successful closures when compared to other categories of disability. The purpose of the current study was to identify the proportion and scope of employment one year after successful VR closure for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Cook also wanted to determine the range of services that these employees received in the year following VR closure.

The Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services (IL-DORS) identified the 315 respondents as having severe psychiatric disabilities. They were all competitively employed when their cases were closed, were an average of 37 years old, and had an average of 12.7 years of education. Interviews were conducted to collect demographic information which included receipt of benefits through Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. Comprehensive employment histories were compiled and verified by previous employers. Respondents also completed the Thresholds Work Attitudes Scale which provided self-reports of worker attitudes and abilities.

One year after their VR cases had been closed, 71% of the respondents were employed. Of those still employed, 63% held the same job as one year before. These figures compared to 84% of individuals with psychiatric disabilities who were employed one year later and 74% on the same job at the national level.

The Illinois residents were earning an average hourly wage of $6.31 (compared to $4.68 for those on the national level) and working an average of 30 hours per week (compared to 22 hours per week for those on the national level). While the hourly wage for both groups increased, neither group showed a significant change in the number of hours worked by the end of their first year of competitive employment.

Receiving family support and participating in self-help groups correlated positively with employment. Medical and mental health care as well as disability income were the most frequent services received by individuals with psychiatric disabilities during the 12-month period following VR case closure. As expected, those who were eligible for SSI/SSDI incomes were less likely to be employed after a year. While this could be a function of the relative severity of the psychiatric disability, the author attributed this to the fact that those who were not eligible for these benefits had the most to gain and the least to lose by successful employment.