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CLE Promising Practices: Braiding Community Employment and Life Engagement Services

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Guidepost #4: Promising Practice

Braiding Community Employment and Life Engagement Services: TransCen's WorkLink Program

By Heike Boeltzig-Brown

Background

WorkLink is a program that braids community employment and life engagement services. The goal is to enable individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to work while receiving wrap-around day supports, as needed. Started in 1996, WorkLink is a program of TransCen, Inc. and is based in San Francisco.

WorkLink clients do not have to give up day supports when deciding to pursue work. In addition to helping individuals establish and maintain meaningful community relationships, day supports are used to discover and explore vocational goals and job options. This information then helps guide individuals' employment planning process.

At WorkLink clients receive individualized combinations of community employment and life engagement services, support plans are built based on needs. Clients can receive a maximum of 30 hours of community support per week. As of January 2014, WorkLink supported 60 people with disabilities, including 39 individuals with IDD. Of those, 24 received both employment and day services, and 15 individuals only received supported employment (SE).

Implementation

The impetus for the new integrated service model. Until 1998, WorkLink only provided SE services to individuals with IDD. WorkLink leadership realized that, when individuals with IDD want to work, they often have to choose between community engagement and integrated employment. Having access to both types of supports is particularly important for individuals with

significant IDD, who often work fewer hours and need additional support to lead active and meaningful lives.

To ensure that individuals who go to work stay connected with their friends and community, and to address vocational discovery and the difficulty individuals with more significant IDD face in accessing employment services and supports through the public vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, WorkLink leadership created a program that braids state IDD-funded community life engagement with state VR-funded customized employment services. All WorkLink clients who receive day services must have an employment goal, and community employment is a shared focus across all WorkLink programs.

Creating a more integrated and customer-friendly service model. In 1998, WorkLink established an hourly rate for day services and did away with set day program hours and required attendance, enabling individuals to decide when and for how many hours they needed day supports. WorkLink's services are 100% community-based and use "community day learning services" for vocational discovery and teaching employability skills, maintaining social connections and supporting other non-work needs.

The primary goal of these services is to develop a personal profile for each individual that includes an employment goal. This is achieved by engaging individuals in targeted volunteer activities in the community through which they can explore new possibilities, learn new skills, refine existing skills, and become more independent.

"Our services are not about field trips or 'visiting places' — they are about skill building. We go to community sites routinely, multiple times so we can use these as teaching environments, not just outings. We focus our service hours on helping people to not only connect with others but to play a valued role in their communities (through volunteer work). We want them to build social- and professional networks. We're looking to encourage

inclusion and friendships — not just be in the community. This does not happen by visiting a place once or just buying a cup of coffee.”

- Sara Murphy, director of WorkLink

Key to this integrated service model is effective staffing and the coordination of services across different teams. WorkLink has two staff teams: a community support team (5 community instructors) and an employment team (3 employment specialists). The latter includes both job developers and job coaches. The teams work closely and collaboratively. Physical co-location of both teams and a weekly “all hands” meeting reinforces this.

How does it work at the individual level? As part of their day service experience, WorkLink clients complete a person-centered discovery and profiling process with the help of the community instructors. WorkLink maintains an average of a 3-to-1 staff-to-client service ratio. Community instructors assess individuals’ interests, skills, and abilities by engaging them in a range of community volunteer activities and classes to identify an employment goal.

“Community day services are used to identify a person’s skills and interests and to explore different work options. The goal is to determine where the person will be most successful, where that person would really sparkle. We then braid in our supported employment services team. The community instructors inform job developers on what the person has shown interest in and the environments he or she prefers. Together, they figure out what might be the best possible job options. Then the employment team develops the position and provides coaching and follow-along supports at the job. Community support needs are then re-evaluated and re-configured to fit the person’s work schedule and non-work needs.”

- Sara Murphy, director of WorkLink

Once the person's skills and employment goal has been determined, the employment team starts the customized placement process by opening a case with VR. The job developer initiates this process and develops a job placement plan (supported with VR funds). Community support services continue during the placement phase. Community instructors work collaboratively with employment services and the individual to continue building skills and confidence in the community while the employment services team follows up on the employment ideas identified during the discovery process. Job developers work one-on-one with the job seeker.

When a position is identified, the placement specialist involves a WorkLink job coach (supported with VR funds) who then works with the individual post-placement. The community instructor remains involved throughout the process, although at a less intensive level. Depending on their work schedules, preferences, and needs, people can continue to receive day supports at a reduced level or may choose to only focus on work.

Like day supports, job-coaching hours are tied to individual needs. As individuals settle into their new job and become more comfortable, the job coach slowly fades support. When individuals have stabilized in their new jobs, VR closes the case and refers the individual for extended job coaching services to the local IDD agency, the Golden State Regional Center. The regional center social worker reevaluates the individual's support plan and adjust the job coaching and community support hours as needed.

Impact

Braiding community employment and life engagement services and tailoring them to individual needs has made supported employment more viable for individuals with significant IDD. Access to comprehensive wrap-around services enables them to lead active, meaningful lives that include community integrated employment.

WorkLink's individual employment outcomes speak for themselves. WorkLink clients who receive braided (day and employment) services work on average 38 hours per month, and earn an average competitive wage of \$12.18/hour. Sixty-three percent are still working after three years, and 55% after seven years (Murphy, 2013).

The new service model has helped WorkLink to bridge programmatic barriers, address service gaps, and respond to customer needs. It has also helped streamline placement services. WorkLink job developers rely on community instructors to do most of the vocational profiling and to teach community and employability skills. Job developers can hit the ground running thanks to the work that is done by the community instructors.

Finally, the focus on person-centered services and a braided team approach to service delivery has also had a positive impact on WorkLink's organizational culture. It has created an "all for one/one for all" mentality within the office and allows the staff to work collaboratively in creative ways to support the needs of each WorkLink client.

Suggestions for Replication

- ***Incorporate a work focus into day services.*** WorkLink re-conceptualized day services in a way that ties them more closely to employment. This encourages individuals with IDD to consider work, aiding them with vocational discovery and skill building, and providing support that wraps around people's work schedules.
- ***Use funding and funding structures creatively.*** WorkLink braids IDD-funded day services with VR-funded employment services in a way that allows individuals with IDD to seamlessly use and tailor various services and supports to their changing needs.
- ***Use community resources as a teaching environment for***

skill building. WorkLink uses local community resources to engage individuals with IDD in focused, strategic activities (including volunteer opportunities) to build the skills needed to work and be successful in today's world. The primary goal of these services is to set clients on a path to employment.

For more information, contact:

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