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Case Studies
of Local Boards and One-Stop Career Centers

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Levels of Involvement of State VR Agencies with Other One-Stop Partners

INTRODUCTION

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) emphasizes coordination and collaboration for better service delivery between state departments of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and other One-Stop partners. Although WIA's requirements for VR participation are clear, the parameters of this partnership are flexible and depend on a variety of factors within each state and local system. Defining the role of VR has had its challenges, as with many partners in the WIA system. However, there are numerous examples of VR agencies working creatively to establish effective partnerships that positively influence services for job seekers with disabilities in the One-Stop system. The following examples are offered for workforce systems as they consider the most appropriate role for local VR partners.

This brief is part of a series of products offering practical solutions for Local Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop Career Centers as they strive to serve all customers, including those with disabilities. Topics covered in other briefs include fiscal issues, models of involvement for community-based disability organizations, addressing staff knowledge and concerns, and the underutilization of One-Stops by individuals with disabilities. The source of the information presented below is from case studies conducted in Los Angeles, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Wilmington, Delaware; New Orleans, Louisiana; Utica, New York; and Clark County, Washington. These case studies were conducted by researchers at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The quotes used in this brief are drawn from our interviews with One-Stop partner staff. To preserve confidentiality, staff names and titles have been omitted.

PARTNERING WITH VR

VR's level of integration is often defined both by circumstances and the discretion of One-Stop partners. Levels of partnership and collaboration can vary based on the model of involvement each state and local area chooses. Considering these factors, differences can be seen in terms of collaboration and building partnerships.

Model #1: Physical co-location with entire local VR office located at One-Stop

Wilmington, DE

In Wilmington, VR came under the administrative umbrella of the Delaware Department of Labor in 1995, and staff from all the divisions were located in the same building. This co-location allowed VR staff to provide a broad range of services. VR offered a "separate protocol," providing more intensive planning services and resources beyond the $3,000 typically available for training through the Department of Labor. Because VR was not in an order of selection* in Delaware, referrals were handled promptly. VR took the position that it should be responsible for all eligible job seekers with disabilities because the agency was the most knowledgeable about making disability determinations. This close physical proximity increased VR's access to information resources and opened up lines of communication. VR staff found that other agency staff more readily drew on their expertise in serving customers with disabilities.

Clark County, WA

In the Vancouver Town Plaza Center in Clark County, the local VR office was based in the same complex as Employment Services. VR's offices were separate from the One-Stop Center but in the same area of the building as the resource room. In addition to providing specialized services at the One-Stops, VR also functioned in a consultation role, offering guidance and advice on how to identify needs, what to ask, and whether to consider VR services. On the whole, other One-Stop staff were receptive to this type of support and had begun to involve VR staff more frequently when assessing clients' skills and selecting the most appropriate services. Full physical co-location encouraged staff from the different agencies to collaborate more and coordinate cases jointly. They utilized and shared more resources for the benefit of their clients, including equipment, information, and knowledge.

Model #2: Full-time co-location of a few VR staff members

Utica, NY

In the Utica area, Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), the state VR agency, co-located staff at the One-Stops

*Order of selection is a federal requirement that must be implemented when there are limited resources: VR must serve those with the most severe disabilities first. As a result, many people with less significant disabilities are required to wait for services.

on a full-time basis. VESID counselors contributed to core services, setting aside time to do so. The counselor in the Rome, NY office ran workshops and staffed the resource room on occasion. The senior-level counselor in the Utica One-Stop served as a liaison for the disability community. She assisted with the community information sessions but did not carry a caseload. VESID conserved resources and staff time when consumers were served effectively through the One-Stop. Meanwhile, the One-Stop provided VESID with an employment-related venue in the community.

Clark County, WA

In Clark County, two full-time VR counselors were on-site at the Vancouver West One-Stop. A VR clerical support person also came to the One-Stop once a week. The VR counselors at this site carried a full caseload and provided consultation to other partner staff about services for customers with disabilities. They assisted with planning for assistive technology and staff training concerning disability issues. VR staff were able to refer clients to other partner staff when they could not immediately work with them due to order of selection. However, VR staff considered it a challenge to stay connected with the rest of the team at the main VR office.

Model #3: Itinerant staffing with consistent VR presence on a part-time basis

Colorado Springs, CO

Since VR's county office was less than two blocks from the One-Stop Center, one VR staff person spent two days per week at the One-Stop and another individual was sometimes there another half-day. These two staff had different roles: one was more of a traditional VR counselor and the other operated as an employer consultant. The employer consultant matched up VR clients with employers once VR clients identified job goals with their primary counselors. At this site, there was a close relationship between frontline employment staff and VR staff, who called upon each other informally to problem-solve disability-related issues. These relationships were fostered by both the director of the county VR office (who was also a Local Workforce Investment Board member) and the One-Stop director. VR's early involvement in planning for the One-Stop system also helped this relationship work.

Model #4: Limited itinerant staffing

New Orleans, LA

Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS) appeared to have a limited presence in the New Orleans One-Stop. An LRS representative visited the One-Stop for four hours every other week and did basic intake interviews with customers with disabilities. LRS's financial situation made it difficult to co-locate on a comprehensive basis. Many One-Stop staff understood LRS's role as only serving people with severe disabilities (due to order of selection). This limited presence made it challenging for other staff to view the agency as a collaborative partner. LRS staff saw the value and benefit of working within the One-Stop, but they struggled with competing priorities.

An Interactive and Mutually Beneficial Relationship

WIA regulations state that the relationship between VR and other One-Stop partners should be interactive in nature, with referral going back and forth between agencies. Ideally, VR and the rest of the One-Stop system can mutually benefit from each other's expertise.

- VR can assist One-Stop Centers in ensuring that the facility and services are fully accessible.
- VR can assist customers who are using non-VR One-Stop services (but qualify for VR services) with assistive technology, job accommodations, and post-employment supports.
- If VR staff members are assisting people to find jobs, they can utilize One-Stop system job search services such as job listings, on-site employer interviews, information sessions, and employer contacts. VR staff can similarly share their employer contacts with One-Stop staff.
- VR clients can avail themselves of the various workshops the One-Stop may offer to all customers, such as resume development and interviewing skills.
- VR staff can assist clients to access other services available within the One-Stop system, including other intensive services as well as training services. They can also share their knowledge of the variety of useful community-based resources.

By creating understanding among One-Stop staff concerning VR services, VR can provide expertise to other One-Stop partners on meeting customer needs and referring individuals who could benefit from VR services. A well-developed partnership can allow resources to be used in a broader yet more efficient fashion, and allow VR to focus on its particular areas of expertise. Adapted from Hoff, D. (2001). *The Role of Public Vocational Rehabilitation and One-Stops*, accessed at www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=65

Los Angeles, CA

In Los Angeles, VR staff were located in different One-Stops through the city on an average of a few days per week. Since there was a limited number of counselors trying to cover multiple One-Stops, they could not be full-time in any one location. During counselors' time on-site, they typically saw only VR clients and had limited interaction with other partner staff or involvement with the resource room. This appeared to be the result of a combination of factors including staff shortages, physical and programmatic inaccessibility, and the cost of leasing space.

STRATEGIES THAT FACILITATE PARTNERSHIP

Enhance communication and information sharing

Communication and information sharing allow partners to educate one another about each other's services and resources on an ongoing basis. Strong communication increases knowledge of each other and alleviates challenges related to differing philosophies, operations, and regulations. This kind of communication and interactive information sharing can be accomplished through a variety of ways.

Implement joint orientation/training sessions

Joint orientation sessions allow VR staff members to spend time with One-Stop staff to learn about the services and resources available and to establish relationships. This kind of "cross-training" should be ongoing so that staff can stay abreast of any changes in service delivery or partner responsibilities. It also encourages personal connections and internal linkage building.

Have regularly scheduled meetings

Scheduled meetings on a consistent basis help to keep all partners current on workforce development activities. These meetings occurred in Clark County, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Utica. They addressed programmatic issues; identified staff needs, concerns, and ideas; shared information about partner staff; and reviewed feedback from customers. In Utica, staff training was successfully integrated into monthly staff meetings for all partner agencies.

Establish comprehensive email networks, electronic listservs, and publications

Clark County and Utica had comprehensive email networks that were used to inform all partners on a regular basis about the goings-on of the One-Stops and to share material that was relevant for all partners. The manager at a Clark County One-Stop sent out a daily email to all partner staff with updates on workshops and recruitment efforts being held and whether there were any staff out for the day. Information concerning workforce issues, including One-Stops, can also be disseminated in the form of special newspapers (e.g., *The State Worker's Paper*, which was sent directly to staff members' homes in Wilmington).

Practice an "open door" policy and be willing to have impromptu meetings

The director of the One-Stop in New Orleans stressed that her door was always open to staff. This created an environment of openness and sharing among partner entities. In Colorado Springs, staff had an open-door policy with one another and did a great deal of information sharing on an informal basis rather than in team meetings or through scheduled appointments.

Clark County held daily "stand-up meetings" that allowed for free and easy exchange between staff and management about more pressing issues. These unscheduled discussions provided a more informal mechanism for checking-in and mutual information exchange.

Consider your floor plan

In Colorado Springs, communication was facilitated by the way the staff were situated. The cubicles were set up so that staff from varying agencies sat together. As an example, Department of Human Services and workforce development specialists sat close together.

Consider establishing cross-partner teams and committees

Teams that span different partners are one way for agency staff to begin working together to address common issues. In Clark County, Los Angeles, Colorado Springs, and Wilmington, the team structure helped to guide the activities of the One-Stops. A single team might include a representative from VR and several other partners with varying backgrounds. Ensuring that each staff person is actively participating within his or her committee or team helps to keep the goals, as well as the strategies through which they are achieved, united and team-based. This cross-partner team structure facilitates the sharing of ideas, problem-solving, and better outreach to staff.

Standardize practices between VR and other partners

Seamlessness between VR and the other One-Stop partners can be enhanced through common intake and application forms that standardize practices. Clark County had a shared intake form that made the referral process and coordination of services not only more manageable but less bureaucratic. The New Orleans partners had a universal application form that enabled job seekers to use any combination of partner services without undergoing multiple intake processes. The form also created consistency among all the partners and served as a communication device regarding services delivered to the customer.

Share data

Data sharing promotes not only efficiency for the customer but improved joint case management and service coordination. In Wilmington, an online database called the Virtual Career Network was used as a virtual forum for information sharing, knowledge exchange, and professional support. Another unique feature developed in Utica was an employer database. New employer listings could be created as they were uncovered, and frontline staff from different partner agencies could record their contact and share information. This provided an organized approach to job development and employer contacts while facilitating partnership and joint service provision.

CONCLUSION

Relationships between VR and other One-Stop partners enhance services in many ways. They allow other One-Stop partners to access VR's expertise and consultation support. In turn, these relationships give VR access to labor market information, other services to meet client needs, and a larger pool of potential employers, and give clients with disabilities who are ineligible for VR services access to other employment supports. The result is greater leveraging of resources and expertise, the ability to stretch existing resources farther, a shared sense of purpose, and an increased likelihood that the needs of job seekers with disabilities will be met.

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This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.

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