

State Agency Promising Practice

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Project GATE in Alabama: Creative Sequencing of Funding

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Background

Alabama has piloted the Gaining Access to Employment project, a collaborative effort between the state's Department of Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities (MH/DD) and its Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Through this project, known as Project GATE, the two agencies work together to help local service providers use funds to support integrated employment opportunities. MH/DD and VR have a long history of partnering, including joint efforts on a supported employment workgroup, due to the strong relationships between colleagues at each department.

Implementation

The supported employment workgroup developed strategies to employ more individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the community. One of the group's strategies was to develop and pilot various ways to move people from sheltered settings. Before launching Project GATE, the Alabama DD Council funded a customized employment grant with the goal of funding agencies across Alabama to move waiver service recipients to competitive community employment. The grant stipulated that the pilot projects must address the high rate of uninsured workers in Alabama.

The first agency to present a proposal was The Arc of Jackson County, a dynamic community rehabilitation provider (CRP) in the rural community of Scottsboro. In collaboration with VR and MH/DD, The Arc launched Project GATE. Consequently, The Arc of Jackson County (one of the four grant recipients) developed a relationship with Sanoh

America, a large local employer within the automotive industry.

Having launched Project GATE, the Arc returned to Sanoh to present

their idea for on-site training with job coaches. This training was intended to ensure that the trainees might be hired into available jobs with competitive wages and benefits. Sanoh immediately committed to participate in Project GATE. Once the employer was confirmed, The ARC, VR, and MH/DD developed a funding sequencing strategy to ensure service coverage at each step of the process. The funding sequencing began with the use of VR funds to support assessment and discovery processes for individuals with more significant disabilities, who had been served in The Arc's day programs for years.

Once individuals indicated an interest in employment and participating in Project GATE, the ARC worked with case management to ask for waiver funds to cover prevocational services for these individuals to receive employment training at Sanoh. In response to this, MH/DD budgeted the cost for staffing and training, and allocated waiver funds for up to five months for one full-time and one part-time job coach. VR provided a paid work experience for up to 480 hours at minimum wage. The cost of the additional supported employment services would be funded through VR's milestone payments system. These milestones were paid at the time of hire, when job coaching started (once employment was offered), and with a retention payment after 90 days (closure).

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Over the first five weeks that Project GATE began at Sanoh, The ARC staggered the start dates for the individuals' training. This allowed time for one person to acclimate to the business setting at Sanoh before the next person started. As Project GATE continues to spread into other regions of Alabama, MH/DD and VR will require that each participating provider identify a local employer to work with before the state confirms their involvement. The provider and the employer then negotiate the details of carrying out the project, with oversight from MH/DD and VR to ensure compliance with regulations and expectations around training and integrated employment. VR and MH/DD also help troubleshoot issues or challenges.

Furthermore, in each agreement with new providers, VR and MH/DD continue to clearly define what entity can fund what service, so the funding sequencing remains clear as more individuals become engaged.

Impact

All individuals completed training in less than the allotted five-month time span and were offered employment at Sanoh. They work throughout the company, doing tasks that match their skills and work environment preferences.

In addition, CRPs around the state have begun to take notice of the project's successful outcomes and have shown an interest in replicating the model. Two of these CRPs are in major cities, and stakeholders are aware that relationship-building with employers may need to be more formalized than in a small rural community such as Scottsboro. As the word spreads about the success of Project GATE, VR and MH/DD staff have given multiple state and local presentations about its successes and outcomes.

Highlights

Alabama's robust collaborative relationship between two state agencies provided the basis for sequencing funds to support CRPs in delivery of integrated employment supports. Clearly defined agreements that explain which entity funds which service reassure CRPs, whose common questions and concerns often keep them from progress.

**For more information on this practice
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