

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Implementation of
Priority Policy Goals

Washington State's Working-Age Adult Policy

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Introduction

Washington's Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) has recently issued a new policy which went into full effect on July 1, 2006. This policy "designates employment supports as the primary method of furnishing state-financed day services to adult participants." Emphasizing community employment as the primary service option, the policy further states that: "services for persons under the age of 62 that do not emphasize the pursuit or maintenance of employment in integrated settings can be authorized only by exception to policy" (WA DSHS, DDD, "County Services for Working Age Adults" Policy 4.11). Initially adopted in 2004, this policy does not eliminate sheltered employment or community access services; rather, it focuses supports towards gainful employment.

Background

The roots of the state's focus on employment trace back to values-based training that began in the late 1970s. These trainings were widely attended over several years, and helped shape many of today's key players in the state. A long-standing network of stakeholders in state and county government, providers, and the advocacy community grew out of this early values-based training. These stakeholders have continued to share information and collaborate, resulting in innovations spreading rapidly through the state.

In addition, the state and counties have maintained a strong investment in employment-related training and technical assistance. The state/counties contract with internal providers for training activities, and

maintain active relationships with a wide variety of external consultants.

Washington has hosted the Ellensburg conference as

a chance for all levels of staff, from front-line day and employment staff to agency administrators, to learn about innovations in the field. Collectively these activities provide ongoing opportunities for networking, debate, and sharing innovations.

Washington's long-standing and continued focus on work as a priority has provided a foundation for state and local administrators to develop a policy that formalizes their espoused values and goals related to community employment for people with disabilities.

Implementation

Stakeholders demanded clear employment expectations from the state. Thus the state and these stakeholders jointly delivered a policy whose cornerstones included: maintaining, achieving, or progressing towards gainful employment; earning a living wage; and was intended for all adults of working age with few exceptions.

Over a period of two years, a comprehensive planning process was undertaken. In addition to a core stakeholder workgroup that identified best practices, implementation began with state and county-level meetings. These meetings were important because they involved key stakeholders and were used to develop local implementation strategies.

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Throughout the planning process, multiple levels of assets were identified. State level assets included: county and state leadership that embraced employment; a strong self-advocate movement; a growing cadre of parents and families who value employment; a committed core group of skilled providers; a system with clear definitions that measures performance with strategies to evaluate outcomes; and a strong culture of training and technical assistance.

Financial assets were also identified that would allow the implementation process to be successful. These included: ongoing state funding for employment; county property tax funds (local property tax dollars that could be used flexibly); additional legislative proviso dollars for students graduating from high school; and joint funding between DDD and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation around some job seekers.

Impact

Although full implementation is recent, county and state level staff are already beginning to see the impact of the policy. One county staff person described the growing assets of local communities and the changes that have been occurring with the advent of the policy. She noted that increasingly, families and self-advocates have greater expectations about work. Provider capacity is improving, as is partnerships with DVR and the education system. Moreover, many providers are developing improved strategies for working with

individuals with the most significant disabilities.

Preliminary state-level data demonstrates progress. There has been some movement of individuals from community access (non-work) supports to community employment. In March of 2004, 1,817 individuals were in community access supports, and in 2007, this number decreased to 321. During that same time period, the number of people in individualized employment increased from 2,992 to 3,410. The largest increase can be observed in the number of people “on the path to employment” which grew from 840 to 2,650.

Suggestions for replication

- » Be clear about employment as the preferred service options for all adults of working age, including those with significant disabilities.
- » Identify local and state assets that contribute to a successful implementation process.
- » Collaborate with multiple stakeholders at the state and local levels.
- » Develop a system with clear definitions that measures performance.
- » Make a clear commitment to training and technical assistance that furthers the end goal of increased employment outcomes.

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