2015

Delphi Panel Findings, Brief #5: Processes Within State Agencies

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Background

This is the fifth in a series of briefs on the findings from a Delphi process conducted by the Employment Learning Community in 2013–2014. More information on the Employment Learning Community and the Delphi process can be found in Brief #1 (Introduction, Values, and Overall Themes).

This brief focuses on the fourth priority area identified by the Delphi panel: improving policies and processes within state agencies related to employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This is distinct from increased collaboration across agencies, which was a separate area.

Improving processes within state agencies

Within the area of intra-agency improvements, four categories of next steps emerged, presented in rank order:

1. Moving toward a more employment-focused state system within multiple agencies (74*)
2. Improving the effectiveness of IDD agencies in supporting employment (59)
3. Improving the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies for people with IDD (36)
4. Involving the broader community (28)

Moving toward a more employment-focused state system within multiple agencies

The highest-ranked priority in this category was making changes in culture and practice within multiple agencies. Recommendations included:

- Practicing "zero exclusion": All individuals who want to work are provided supports for integrated employment. Individuals are not screened out because they are not "work-ready." (72)
- Promoting a culture within the state VR and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) systems that promotes the values of supported employment for people with significant disabilities. This includes fostering a belief that all people can work, even if we

The Employment Learning Community has been developed to assist states in improving employment systems and services that will increase inclusive, competitive employment for individuals with IDD. To gain insights on the most cogent policies and priorities to promote such systems change, the project convened a panel of national subject matter experts to participate in a Delphi process. Nineteen Delphi panel members, including employment researchers, service providers, state vocational rehabilitation directors, developmental disability agency directors, educators, self-advocates, family members and representatives from related programs and initiatives, participated in four rounds of data collection. The values, policies, and practices that emerged from this effort are being presented in this series of seven briefs:

1. Introduction, Values, and Major Themes
2. Transition From School to Work
3. Collaboration Across Agencies
4. Education and Training for Job Seekers
5. Processes Within State Agencies
6. Generation and Use of Data and Evidence
7. Paths Toward Fair Wages

have not yet figured out how to support them. (67)
- Creating funding incentives for integrated/community employment and day supports. Restructuring rates for employment services to be equal to or higher than other day services. (67)
- Focusing on effective job matching. Knowing who the customers are (e.g., employers and individuals with disabilities) and catering to their needs. (54)
- Adopting policies that support and fund a more comprehensive package of employment supports for all underemployed and unemployed adults. These include supports for health care (physical and mental), family care (personal, child, elderly care), transportation, and affordable education and training regardless of the person's eligibility for a program based on "disadvantaged status." (51)
- Promoting outcomes-focused and data-driven approaches to employment supports. Requiring accountability regarding community employment outcomes. Gathering and using baseline data with subsequent annual goals to increase community employment outcomes, and paying providers based on demonstration of desired outcomes. (51)
- Promoting integrated employment supports as an

* Numbers in parentheses are the standardized scores of the item's ranking across panel members. The standardized scores were calculated as follows: Standardized Score = (sum of scores-minimum score)/(maximum score-minimum score)

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investment in the future: Fiscal accountability to the taxpayer requires directing resources toward integrated employment outcomes. While integrated employment supports may not be the most cost-effective option for each and every individual, there is a body of evidence supporting their cost-effectiveness overall. (51)

There were also several lower-ranked recommendations in this category: Providing individualized training and technical assistance to service provider agencies to assist with the change process (36), developing well-written Medicaid waiver policies to fund extended support services (36), abolishing waiting lists for services by advocating for better funding (36), and providing benefits counseling through VR and IDD agencies (34).

Improving the effectiveness of IDD agencies in supporting employment

Several recommendations were made specific to IDD agencies:

- Promoting individualized, person-centered, and self-directed services. (77)
- Helping families and providers rethink the necessity of individuals with IDD spending eight hours a day in a day program, and instead using community resources to structure time the same way everyone else does. (56)
- Strengthening knowledge and skills within the case management system so personnel know best practices and can advocate for and promote employment. (50)
- Increasing reimbursement rates to be in line with cost of providing follow-along and other support services. (49)

There were two lower-ranked recommendations for IDD agencies: Creating incentives for community inclusion efforts in addition to employment, including funding for periodic supports seven days per week, 365 days per year (37); and conducting community-based work assessments with supports instead of standardized evaluations (31).

Improving the effectiveness of VR agencies for people with IDD

Another group of recommendations related to how VR agencies serve people with IDD. Recommended improvements included:

- Adjusting funding rates and procedures to pay for the supports and services someone needs to be successful. Operating from a "what do you need" perspective, rather than adhering to a standardized rule (e.g., benchmark payment at referral and 10 days after placement, 20 hours of job coaching only, and

any more being an exception for review). (77)
- Increasing VR funding for supported employment and self-employment supports. (65)
- Increasing training for VR counselors in customized employment and non-traditional employment options (self-employment, supported self-employment, etc.). (59)
- Developing an IDD technical specialty for VR counselors. The counselor with this specialty in each office would be the primary liaison with local community rehabilitation providers serving individuals with IDD. (53)
- Supporting postsecondary education as a pathway to integrated competitive employment. (49)

Again there were two lower-ranked recommendations: Developing strong communication strategies for employers (36), and implementing an order of selection as required (13).

Involving the broader community

Finally, panelists had recommendations around how state agencies could better engage with the broader community, including self-advocates and families. Two priority strategies emerged:

- Educating self-advocates and families. Using Employment First policies to raise family expectations. (71)
- Providing public education to the community on simple steps that make employment settings accessible, how this benefits the individual as well as the work place and the community, and how to make this process successful. (54)

A third, lower-ranked recommendation was to increase connections between job seekers with IDD and employed individuals who can serve as role models (25).

Conclusions

The Delphi panel had a number of recommendations on how to improve values and processes within state agencies. Several of these focused on systematic changes within multiple agencies; these included promoting a culture that values employment and creating funding structures and policies to reflect that value.

Recommendations specific to IDD agencies included moving toward a more person-centered and less programmatic approach that emphasizes and supports individual employment. For VR agencies, recommendations focused on improving the funding and capacity for serving people with IDD, including capacity to provide supported and customized employment.

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Advancing employment and opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities

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The Employment Learning Community (ELC) is a project of ThinkWork at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

ELC is funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration on Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services.

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