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Research Report

Rural Community Economic Leadership by People with Disabilities

The lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities is a major problem according to vocational rehabilitation (VR) service providers, American Indian Section 121 employment programs, and people with disabilities (Arnold, Seekins, & Nelson, 1997).

This is particularly true in rural areas where local businesses struggle to create enough quality jobs for community members, including people with disabilities.

In the face of this challenge, rural residents with and without disabilities frequently opt to pursue self-employment. Yet, VR and Section 121 programs are often confused about existing business opportunities and their potential for success. There are established procedures to analyze markets and develop business plans (Arnold, Seekins, et al., 2001), but there is no systematic way to initially identify potentially-viable business ideas and opportunities. Rural areas often lack leaders who can take responsibility for conducting economic development programs (Knapp & Simon, 1994).

Vocational Rehabilitation programs rarely consider collaborating with community economic development activities, and rural community economic development practitioners rarely think of VR as a potential economic development partner, or of people with disabilities as potential entrepreneurs and community leaders.

In the new disability paradigm, community participation is a key outcome variable (Seelman & Sweeney; World Health Organization, 1997). Participation means being actively engaged in community life and achieving a sense of belonging to the community. Leading community activities is one way to achieve this. A goal of our research is to explore the leadership role people with disabilities, as well as rehabilitation service providers, might play in rural economic development, and to examine the economic and personal benefits of such leadership to them and their communities.

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Methods and Approach

We conducted our study in a rural eastern Utah county (population 10,892). A Utah State Vocational Rehabilitation Program regional office was the primary local sponsor for the project. The area's unemployment rate is 8%, with 3,218 residents in the workforce. There are nine principal towns including the county seat (population 3,000). Coal mining and transport, together with power generation and transmission, dominate the area economy.

We developed an import substitution-based manual that local groups could use to assess rural community economic development. Two local consumers of VR services were trained as Project Leaders and they in turn recruited and trained four additional volunteers (Economic Development Director, regional VR supervisor, another VR staff member, and a local bank president, none with reported disabilities) to help conduct the community economic development assessment described in the manual. The two leaders and four team members reviewed the findings and identified business opportunities.

RTC: Rural researchers evaluated the project by assessing the number of business opportunities identified and pursued; the effect of leadership on community participation as measured by the Project Leaders' engagement; and the effects of engagement on the Project Leaders' psychological sense of community.

Key Terms

Community Economic Development: The process of creating a climate that encourages the retention, expansion, and creation of businesses. Of the many strategies for promoting economic development, two of the most-widely-used are (1) business and industrial recruitment and retention; and (2) community economic development through import substitution.

Business and Industrial Recruitment: Local government, business, and civic organizations recruit businesses and industries to locate their operations in the area. This typically involves

offering various tax incentives and local investments in return for the promise to create local jobs.

Import Substitution: Identifies opportunities to use local resources to create and expand businesses. Interested citizens develop an accurate portrait of the area's geography, demographics, and resources. They survey businesses to identify which products and services are purchased outside the area, yielding ideas for goods and services that could potentially be produced locally.

Vocational Rehabilitation: A nationwide federal/state partnership that supports people with disabilities in achieving economic self-sufficiency. Each state typically has a network of local and regional offices serving individuals and groups.

Section 121 Programs: Reservation-based employment programs that support American Indians with disabilities. (Reservations have the highest national rates of both disability and unemployment.)

Civic Engagement: Joining others in public or semi-public organizations or projects.

Preliminary Findings

The process identified 32 new or existing businesses with potential for development or expansion. These were grouped as "most viable", "have potential", or "would face significant challenges". The Core Team considered the following 32 business expansion or creation opportunities.

Most Viable Opportunities

1. Integrate/coordinate/expand leather tanning businesses.
2. Enhance local meat processing and sales. Sell by-product hides to other businesses (#1 and #22).
3. Provide color photocopying service to public and local government agencies.
4. Sell beauty supplies to the many area shops.
5. Produce salsa in conjunction with a local

power plant.

6. Process and export gypsum on a larger scale.
7. Establish a chemical sales route and take orders from local businesses.
8. Organize, expand, and export mine-support services to other areas.
9. Expand produce growing (e.g., truck farming) and sales to local grocers and restaurants.
10. Salvage steel and other metals and sell to local construction businesses.
11. Provide family-oriented recreational activities (e.g., bowling, skating, mini-golf, arcade, theater, etc.).
12. Expand transportation services.

Opportunities with Potential

13. Create/expand assisted living facilities and services.
14. Clean animal skulls for trophy mounting and direct sales.
15. Expand business/office supply sales and services if local government and other businesses will support.
16. Rent out small tools, household items, gardening and minor construction equipment, etc.
17. Sell/ repair computer equipment.
18. Order and distribute beverages.
19. Manufacture wallboard.
20. Produce taxidermy mannequins for local use and export, perhaps in conjunction with #1 and #14
21. Produce and sell scrapbook supplies, possibly as part of #15.
22. Produce and export leather goods (such as shades), perhaps by linking existing businesses #1 and #2.
23. Manufacture and export caskets.
24. Expand motel, bed and breakfast, and dining services for tourists.
25. Promote tourist activities such as rafting, sell related products, and provide related services.
26. Expand rug production and export.
27. Cast/sell brass saddle hardware.

Five Additional Opportunities Expected to Face Significant Challenges

28. Providing one-hour film processing.
29. Designing, manufacturing, and selling greeting cards.
30. Operating a movie theater.
31. Producing modular homes.
32. Selling restaurant supplies.

Although one Project Leader began with a higher baseline rate of civic engagement than the other, both Project Leaders' rates of engagement increased significantly. The assessment of impact on psychological sense of community did not detect changes associated with any particular phase of the study.

This study is limited in that it presents only preliminary results. Only two Project Leaders and four volunteers (without reported disabilities) participated. Data on actual business start-ups are yet to be collected. Next, we will continue to evaluate the impact of import substitution assessment on this Utah community to determine if any of the identified business opportunities have been developed. If so, do people with disabilities take advantage of them? We will also assess how this process complements both VR and local economic development programs. Finally, we will continue to explore methods for measuring community belonging or attachment in order to detect changes resulting from increased participation.

References and Resources

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