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Research Progress Report

Transportation: A barrier to successful employment outcomes among rural VR clients

In testimony to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Billy Altom, Executive Director of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) stated, “the lack of available, affordable, and accessible transportation is one of the most significant and persistent problems faced by people with disabilities ... This is especially true in rural America.”

Lack of transportation translates into barriers in employment, health care access, and community participation among rural people with disabilities (Iezzoni, Killeen, & O’Day, 2006; Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005). Recently, this was confirmed by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency research participants, representing 48 VR agencies in 37 states, who said transportation was a significant barrier to successful employment outcomes among rural clients.

Methods

In 2011, we conducted qualitative research on rural VR service delivery practice, including barriers to successful outcomes. Informants came from 17 general, 12 blind/low-vision, and 19 combined VR agencies. We conducted a total of 82 semi-structured interviews with 21 counselors, 4 supervisors, 37 area managers, and 20 administrators. Two researchers participated in the interviews. Interview notes were coded using QSR NVIVO 2.0 qualitative analysis software.

Rural Transportation Issues

Forty-one respondents, representing 31 agencies, described very limited or non-existent public transportation options within their rural service areas. Informants from 17 agencies said that although public transportation was available in small communities, bus schedules were too limited. For instance, the bus in one community ran only three times per week and in another, buses ran only on weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Although these schedules accommodated shopping, errands, and appointment needs, they were not suited to transport clients to and from full-time employment.

Informants representing 21 agencies said there were no public transportation options in certain regions they served. Seven of these informants indicated that clients who did not have a personal vehicle

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or who did not have family and friends willing to drive them had very few options for traveling to and from work and, consequently, had limited employment opportunities.

Transportation Solutions

Rather than focus on barriers, we asked informants how they assisted clients to overcome transportation issues. In general, responses focused on transportation counseling, natural supports, community private/public options, employer-sponsored transportation, and personal vehicle ownership. The following table lists 10 promising transportation strategies.

Ten Promising Rural Transportation Strategies

1. Integrate personal transportation planning into the counseling process.
2. Utilize natural supports, including family, friends, and co-workers as ride sources.
3. Provide reimbursement for rides.
4. Access public and private providers to meet client needs.
5. Allow counselors to provide rides in some situations.
6. Assist employers to develop sponsored rides or vanpools as a hiring strategy.
7. Support the acquisition of personal vehicles.
8. Coordinate with other state agencies to hire an interagency transportation coordinator.
9. Participate in the development or expansion of local transit options.
10. Participate in the development of a voucher model for rural transportation.

Transportation Counseling

Twenty-eight informants, representing 21 agencies, described transportation planning in the context of the counseling process. Six of these indicated that they required clients to travel from their rural communities to the VR office to

develop self-reliance for securing transportation. These informants identified self-advocacy for exploring transportation options as critical to job placement. One informant said that agency policy did not allow for any transportation assistance so it was up to the client to figure out transportation.

Eight informants indicated that transportation was a significant element of employment planning. In cases where public transportation was not available, the client needed to develop a plan for securing rides to employment or focus on jobs that were within walking distance. Three informants described this planning in the context of budgeting or setting aside wages to cover transportation costs. Five informants said they discussed relocation with their clients who had limited transportation options.

Eight informants described how counselors assisted clients with developing transportation options. Three highlighted networking exercises, where clients explored personal connections with family, friends, churches, schools, and clubs to informally address transportation needs. Four informants counseled clients about developing shared rides or carpooling arrangements. One of these described a situation where arrangements were hard to develop if the client had a “hard to get along with” personality. One informant explored alternatives with the clients such as vehicle purchase and repairs. Two others said they wrote driver’s education into employment plans. Overall, informants realized the importance of transportation regarding long term employment outcomes.

Natural Supports

In the absence of owning a personal vehicle, natural supports from family, friends, coworkers, or acquaintances often were described as the primary transportation option in rural places. Forty-three informants, representing 31 agencies, highlighted natural supports for addressing transportation issues. Of these, 32 informants focused on rides from family and friends, and 11 highlighted coworker supports for work related travel.

One informant said his agency did not offer any type of reimbursement for natural supports, but 18 others said their agencies provided travel support. Reimbursement rates varied across agencies. For instance, one agency provided a 0.25 per mile reimbursement rate for work related travel, while another offered 0.40 per mile. Eight informants described situations where travel costs were covered for work related travel until the client received his or her first paycheck. Six informants indicated that travel costs were covered for office visits or to attend training, but not for employment related travel.

Community Public/Private Options

Informants offered a variety of other strategies for addressing transportation issues. Many of these options, however, were described as short term solutions for traveling to and from appointments. Six informants highlighted that rural medical care transport services could be used when there was slack demand. Six others described transportation services that primarily served individuals with disabilities or the elderly, such as Dial a Ride or para-transit services. One drawback of these door-to-door services was strict guidelines about cancellations. For instance, one informant said that cancelled rides within 24 hours of pickup were considered no shows and jeopardized the opportunity to secure future rides. Additionally, rides needed to be scheduled well ahead of time and pick-ups often were delayed, making it difficult to arrive on time for scheduled appointments.

Nine informants discussed public options, but noted drawbacks to these arrangements. For instance, while taxi service was available in smaller communities, the cost was prohibitive over the long run. Likewise, although bus service was described as an option, informants noted that most bus schedules did not accommodate travel related to full-time employment. Four informants said their VR agency was addressing this problem by taking an active role in expanding public transportation options. One state hired a transportation coordinator who worked with multiple social service agencies to share resources and to guide the use of 5310

and 5307 transportation dollars. Two agencies helped secure grant or stimulus funds to expand existing bus schedules and routes, and another agency used stimulus funds for a new client business in rural transportation.

Three informants described situations where the counselor offered rides to clients if required. Although this was not described as an ideal situation, counselors could hold secondary liability insurance for transporting clients to appointments, interviews, etc. Two informants indicated that VR worked with faith-based organizations to secure transportation in certain communities.

Employer Sponsored Transportation

Informants representing three agencies in the southern US said that a few employers offered transportation from and to rural areas. One large employer provided a van for shift workers, whose schedules fell outside the hours when public or private options were available. Another employer relied on federal contracts that had specific stipulations for hiring individuals with disabilities. To comply with contract requirements, the employer attracted people with disabilities from outlying areas by providing free transportation to and from the workplace for the first month and offering rides for pay, after that.

Personal Vehicle Ownership

Some VR agencies assisted clients in securing personal vehicles or helped clients modify existing vehicles to make them accessible. Three informants said that VR funds could be used to purchase vehicles for clients if the purchase was related to their plan of employment. One of these indicated that vehicle purchase could be problematic because the client retained the vehicle, even if he or she lost the job. Four said that VR helped repair or modify vehicles. Five other informants highlighted additional ways VR helped clients secure personal vehicles, such as through the development of Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS plans), leveraging TANF funds, or purchasing vehicles as a piece of equipment for self-employment. Driver's education and securing a license were seen as prerequisites to VR involvement in vehicle purchases.

Recommendations

VR agency informants described a variety of strategies for addressing rural transportation issues, but few options translate into longer-term solutions. One path to expanding local rural transportation is for advocates, individuals, and community agencies to work together to establish transportation voucher programs. In general, voucher models provide resources to individuals with disabilities, who then purchase their own rides.

Voucher Models

Voucher models include three key players: community partners, transportation providers, and riders. Community partners are instrumental in estimating user demand, developing a cadre of transportation providers, identifying and obtaining funding, and marketing the program. Transportation providers, paid and volunteers, are essential for meeting the ongoing demands of riders. They might include public and private transportation providers, family members, or other volunteers. Riders purchase rides with vouchers.

Funds for developing a voucher model can come from a variety of resources including Section 5310, Section 5311, and Section 5317 transportation funds; TANF and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds; United We Ride; or state, local and private funding sources. Resources are available to provide a more complete understanding of voucher models and strategies for developing a model in the communities you serve:

- A wiki hosted by JobLinks and the Community Transportation Association, <http://sites.google.com/site/voucher-program/home>
- APRIL Toolkit for operating a rural transportation voucher program, <http://www.april-rural.org/>
- A training manual about developing a supported volunteer rural transportation voucher program, <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/Trn/TrnManual.htm>

Conclusion

VR agency informants described several strategies for addressing transportation barriers ranging from individual to community level approaches. At the individual level, transportation counseling that includes personal networking strategies is one model for addressing the unique needs of individual clients. Community approaches such as hiring interagency transportation coordinators, expanding bus routes, or supporting client sponsored transportation businesses provide a more consistent strategy. Voucher models are another avenue for expanding rural access. Regardless of the model, VR agencies share an interest in transportation access and are situated to provide assistance at the individual, agency, and community level.

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