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The University of Montana Rural Institute



Research and Training Center on
Disability in Rural Communities

Research Progress Report

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Approaches to Job Development

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies provide a range of services to help people with disabilities become employed. How services are delivered, however, depends on several factors including client interests and abilities as well as economic opportunities within the local community.

For better or worse, rural and urban clients face vastly different employment landscapes. For instance, USDA Economic Resource Service data indicate that rural people earn lower wages and experience lower employment rates (ERS, 2012). Rural counties also have fewer full-time jobs per capita, particularly in skilled labor sectors (ERS, 2012; Parker, 2003). Urban areas have higher employment rates in professional and managerial positions, while rural communities have higher rates in blue collar and resource based occupations (ERS, 2006) characterized by limited benefits and less opportunity for advancement (Boushey, Fremstad, Gragg, & Waller, 2007). Additionally, rural counties have a higher percentage of very small firms (i.e., less than 50 employees) compared to urban counties (Knoder, 2011). This economic variation requires different employment strategies for rural and urban clients.

Recently, we conducted a national qualitative study to better understand how VR agencies approach rural employment with their clients. This factsheet focuses on informant comments related to the rural employment landscape and VR approaches to overcoming barriers and developing jobs for rural clients.

Methods

In total, we conducted 82 qualitative interviews with personnel from 48 state VR agencies, including 17 general agencies, 12 blind/low vision agencies, and 19 combined agencies. VR directors at each participating agency identified informants who could speak about current rural delivery practices. Interviewees consisted of 21 counselors, 4 supervisors, 37 area managers, and 20 administrators. Two researchers interviewed informants and coded notes using QSR NVIVO 2.0 qualitative analysis software.

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Rural Employment

When describing rural employment, informants (n = 18) representing 16 agencies described a shifting economic landscape. The majority

We see a shrinking economy in the rural employment landscape with less resource-based industries; factories; farming practices; and hospitality, tourism or building opportunities.

of these (n = 11) described a shrinking economy, which included the reduction of resource-based industries (n = 4), factories closing (n = 4), shrinking agricultural employment due to changes in farming practices (n = 3), decreasing hospitality or tourism opportunities in the depressed economy (n = 2), and a

contracting building industry (n = 2). Informants (n = 4) from four agencies said job opportunities were growing in certain skilled labor markets such as nursing and biotechnology, but jobs required substantial additional training. Informants (n = 4) from three agencies said the oil boom significantly impacted certain regions of their states and that employment opportunities both within and outside the oil industry were readily available. However, labor demand negatively impacted housing and living costs, making relocation difficult.

Informants (n = 7) from seven agencies described employment within the context of a depressed economy. The consensus among them was that competition for entry level jobs was stiff, and few people with disabilities were considered because employers wanted people who could perform multiple tasks. Additionally, it was noted that fewer people were leaving their jobs in the first place, so there were fewer entry-level positions available. Two informants also said VR clients were competing with people without disabilities who had lost their main jobs and came with substantial education and experience.

Rural Infrastructure

Informants (n = 34) from 25 agencies highlighted a lack of support services in rural communities. Fifteen informants described limited services for addressing a client's disability, such as no physical therapy, mental health, developmental disability, or interpreter services. Other informants (n = 13) said it was difficult to secure employment resources, such as education or training, job readiness classes, or job coaches. Three informants said they could secure services for rural clients, but it cost extra to cover travel for providers to visit outlying areas. One informant also indicated that counselors were at the mercy of traveling providers to get timely services, explaining that it often took three months to schedule and receive reports from a traveling psychological evaluator. Other informants (n = 3) said rural clients needed to move or travel to get appropriate services.

Services for our clients can be difficult to secure, and when services are obtained, they often come with extra costs to cover travel for the providers.

Rural Community Connections

Despite constrained economic opportunities, several informants described positive aspects of rural job development. Informants (n = 37) from 65% of the agencies in the study highlighted the importance of rural community connections.

Networking and Trust Building. Primarily, informants (n = 32) described the development of counselor community connections through networking and trust building. Networking activities included taking business tours; attending Chamber of Commerce or other community meetings; developing one-on-one relationships with mom and pop businesses; and visiting with people in informal settings like church, the grocery store, or a basketball game.

Developing rapport with key community stakeholders is vital to job placement.

Additionally, several informants said it was important to develop rapport with key community stakeholders since word of mouth was vital for job placement. Two informants said many rural businesses were

open to hiring people with disabilities because they viewed it as helping the community overall and saw it as a civic duty.

Informants described trust building as essential to VR's effectiveness. In general, rural communities were characterized as suspicious of outsiders, but well developed relationships and accountability helped create opportunities for VR clients. Conversely, once counselor trust was jeopardized through difficult referrals or poor accountability, word traveled quickly and led to closed doors.

Informal Relationships. Informants (n = 5) also indicated that informal relationships were more important in rural as compared to urban communities. For instance, a handshake was considered as binding as written agreements and friend-of-a-friend relationships provided the wealth of identified job opportunities. Informants acknowledged that it was easier for counselors to develop relationships with decision makers in rural areas, which resulted in more flexible and innovative approaches. For instance, one informant described a situation where a transportation barrier was overcome by negotiating for a client to ride a rural school bus to and from town each day.

Community Linkages. Informants (n = 4) also described the importance of connecting with other social service agencies or community partners in rural areas. They highlighted the transient role that VR played in many outlying communities and the importance of utilizing resource partners to assist clients in developing community linkages,

identifying job opportunities, completing paper work, and filling out applications.

Small Town Attitudes. While community connections were mostly described in favorable terms, 11 informants described a downside. Specifically, lack of anonymity sometimes resulted in closed doors if the client had burned bridges in the community, had a criminal history, or was related to someone who had a poor reputation. Additionally, four informants said clients resisted disclosure because of small town attitudes about disability and particularly the stigma surrounding mental health problems.

Employer Approaches

In general, VR informants described rural community connections as the primary mechanism for developing employment opportunities in rural areas. In addition to this informal approach, informants also described strategies to help clients get a "foot in the door" at rural businesses.

On the Job Training. Informants (n = 31) representing 25 agencies provided opinions about on the job training (OJT) or other work experience arrangements. The majority of informants (n = 24) said OJT or work experience programs were an important tool for developing long-term employment opportunities. Specifically, they acknowledged that many rural businesses were reluctant to hire people with disabilities and that OJT or work experience programs allowed the employer to "try" out the client. Additionally, two informants highlighted that work experiences were a strategy for overcoming a poor work or criminal history.

Eight informants indicated that work experience programs were easier to develop than OJT since there was no requirement or expectation of the employer to provide employment once the work experience or trial was concluded. Another informant said his agency developed OJTs but adopted a "no commitment, no blame" approach so that employers were willing to consider future OJT placements. Four other informants said they

ran OJTs through temp agencies so that the client was never formally on the business payroll until an actual hire. Three informants said OJT was used in the absence of local education or training opportunities.

Seven informants said OJT was not helpful for securing long term employment. Two of these indicated that OJT was a poor tool in the current economy since many businesses were laying people off and that offering OJT sent a

negative message to employees. One informant said clients were reluctant to participate in OJT since it identified them as having a disability. Another informant said OJT was unnecessary for rural jobs and seemed more like bribery since most positions were entry level and did not require intensive training.

When it comes to on the job training, we use a “no commitment, no blame” approach so that employees are willing to consider future OJT placements.

Self Employment. Informants (n = 23) from 17 agencies discussed self-employment as an option for rural clients. Sixteen informants described small businesses initiated by their rural clients, such as lawn care, snow removal, sheep farming, sewing, or businesses that tapped into tourist markets, such as indigenous arts and crafts or fishing and hiking excursions. One informant said self-employment didn’t work in rural areas due to limited demand, and three others said their agency made special allowances for rural self-employment ventures, such as relaxing standards for business income generated or supporting seasonal businesses.

Other informants described self-employment from a policy or agency perspective. One informant said VR counselors were trained in self-employment, so they were better equipped to offer it as an employment option. Three informants described VR relationships with

small business development centers (SBDCs) or similar agencies to assist their clients with business plan development. One informant said his agency worked closely with Economic Development Councils to develop needed services and products with clients.

Home Based Businesses. Seven informants described home based services for contract. These included services such as medical transcription, customer service, or call centers where individuals could work from home for large companies like Walmart, McDonalds, or Meyer Foods. Some of these businesses were dedicated to hiring people with disabilities through federal contracts, such as the National Telecommuting Institute and the IRS.

Rural Counseling Strategies

Informants also described rural employment strategies geared towards the client and counseling process.

Managing Expectations. Informants (n = 9) from nine agencies said counselors tried to paint a very realistic picture of rural job opportunities for their clients, including the realities of the rural job market, expected wage ranges, and opportunities for advancement. Counselors also addressed unrealistic expectations with their clients, such as when the client believed that he or she would be hired by a local business that only hires one person per year. While counseling efforts focused on client choice, choice was explored within the constraints of geographic parameters.

Relocation. Informants (n = 56) from 39 agencies described relocation among rural clients. In general, clients who were older, entrenched within the rural community, owned land or a home, or resided on a reservation were described as very reluctant to move away. Conversely, people who were younger, wanted to access better support services, or had previously lived outside the rural community were described as more likely to move to new locations. Cited barriers for relocation included a general reluctance or fear of the unknown (n = 23), loss

of social supports (n = 8), and costs associated with relocation (n = 2). Despite noted barriers,

Counselors try to paint a realistic picture of job opportunities for their clients, including the realities of the rural job market, wages, opportunities for advancement, and the possibility of needing to relocate.

several informants (n = 17) indicated that relocation was discussed within the counseling process as a strategy to address transportation, employment, or service availability barriers. Five of these informants indicated that VR could cover relocation costs, if necessary. Another informant took relocation counseling a step further, by

touring the client around a larger community to provide a taste of a larger job market.

Conclusion

Despite noted barriers to rural employment, including fewer support services, less public transportation, and more limited job opportunities, rural VR clients do get employed. In fact, recent data suggest that employment rates among VR clients are similar across geography. Strategies to create these employment opportunities include a reliance on rapport, accountability, and presence in the local community for both the client and counselor.

Opportunities for developing relationships with employers include OJTs and related work experience programs to demonstrate competence and trustworthiness. Additional approaches, such as self-employment, home-based businesses, or relocation, provide alternatives to help people overcome limitations within their own communities. Overall, rural job development requires a tailored approach to matching client skills and abilities with the realities of the local community.

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