

T-TAP

Training and Technical Assistance for Providers

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Q & A on Customized Employment: Developing Collaborative Community Partnerships

The formation of meaningful collaborative partnerships among public and private programs and agencies is an essential way to maximize resources. Skilled professionals know that few community rehabilitation programs can undertake their employment mission alone. The sharing of the targeted resources of many agencies to different tasks is an extraordinary way to leverage dollars. Inevitably, any successful customized employment program will reflect shared interagency partnerships and collaboration. This fact sheet describes strategies that enhance the development of effective collaborative community partnerships focusing on competitive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Q

Why are collaborative community partnerships important?

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Collaborative community partnerships that target improved employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities are important for a number of reasons. First, individuals with significant disabilities face multiple challenges when pursuing employment. These challenges are related in part to the impact of a variety of obstacles potentially experienced in a job search. For example, individuals who have significant disabilities are often not well understood by the community, particularly among employers. This misunderstanding stems from the myths and stereotypes about disability that can limit vocational opportunities.

The challenges faced by individuals with significant disabilities are also related to a frequently complex, sometimes splintered, and often over-extended, service network in the community (exemplified by multiple service providers trying to help the consumer without clear lines of responsibility drawn).



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What difficulties do individuals with disabilities face in accessing community services?



Many individuals with significant disabilities seeking employment can have difficulty accessing and coordinating the variety of services and agencies that can be involved in this process. Let's walk through a typical service scenario with a person with mental illness. The mental health center provides therapeutic and case management services, but it does not provide employment supports and does not have funds to pay for employment services. To access employment services, the mental health center refers the consumer to the Vocational Rehabilitation agency. This agency goes through its eligibility process and sets up a plan for employment with the consumer involving referral to a community rehabilitation program that will work with the person in getting a job.

One step in the job find process might involve the consumer going to the local One Stop Employment Center to review existing job opening information. If the person is a recipient of Social Security Disability benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income, it can be critically important that he or she be very well informed on the potential impact of earnings through employment on benefits. So referral to a Benefits Planning specialist is now added to the service mix. The individual with significant disabilities now has multiple points of contact in his or her service plan. It is very easy to see the challenge faced by this consumer in self-managing this array of services and contacts, particularly in situations where the agencies themselves have not worked out an integrated approach to sharing information and coordinating services. An integrated approach to supporting this individual is needed if the desired employment outcome is to be achieved.



What is meant by an integrated approach to collaborative community partnerships?



There are multiple agencies and points of contacts that can be involved in employment efforts for the individual with significant disabilities. This mix of service providers can have different philosophies, eligibility and selection criteria. Staff backgrounds and experiences across the programs can vary considerably.

When a consumer is dealing with a series of discrete programs, these differences become roadblocks to receiving services and to accomplishing employment goals.

When a consumer is working with an integrated service system, these differences are worked-out within the partnership, and the service flow is fluid among the partners for the consumer. The overarching goal of an interagency partnership is to create an integrated, seamless service process where the consumer can move easily from partner to partner as needed to successfully obtain, retain, and advance in employment. Effective collaborative community partnerships can move us away from offering a difficult to access series of discrete, non-aligned services and toward an integrated approach to service coordination and delivery.



What are examples of community partnerships focused on customized employment outcomes?



Community partnerships can develop across a variety of situations, such as creation of a local business network that promotes access of people with disabilities to jobs, or a agency partnership focused on meeting the individualized support needs of a specific consumer. The common thread running through each of the following examples is a clear focus on achieving customized employment outcomes.

Staff from Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards (CSB) in Georgia created connections to the business and social networks in a small community served by the CSB by forming a collaborative partnership among 12 small business owners. This partnership put into place a network of businesses that employment support staff could use in determining who in that community would be key to helping people with disabilities find employment based on each individual consumer's vocational profile and stated work goals. The network has worked extremely well. Now participants call on one another as needed regarding employment opportunities available through member businesses. CSB staff calls on the business owners to identify potential job leads.

Another example involves the CSB partnering with a church and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Through this partnership, a blending of resources was accomplished that supported a customer's goal of employment and independence. The church funded a portion of the cost of a van, the salary of a personal care attendant and the individual's rent; VR funded the cost of making the van accessible; and the CSB funded needed employment supports and assistive technology.

Also, a partnership was created with the local micro-enterprise development center. This partnership supports customized employment by facilitating access to creative funding sources. The local United Way provides funding managed by the micro enterprise center for Individual Development Account (IDA) micro-loans to support individual employment objectives. The partnership agreement with the micro-enterprise center facilitates access to the IDA business start-up micro-loans, grants for high-speed Internet access, and other technology grants to bridge the digital divide.



What are the major challenges in establishing effective community partnerships?



A challenge to forming effective community partnerships is addressing potential turf issues that exist among partnering agencies. Is there an agency in the partnership that is designated by law (or maybe even by traditional practices) as the lead agency for employment services for individuals with significant disabilities? If this partnership is being formed because current employment practices are not generating employment outcomes, the designated lead agency could approach the partnership with a defensive, protective attitude.

A positive strategy for defusing turf issues is involving consumer and advocacy representatives in sufficient numbers where they are not token participants. Another strategy is to disperse leadership responsibility among the partners so that it is not centered with any

one agency. The partnership can also agree to the completion of a strategic plan as the first step. An agreed upon strategic plan that has the full participation of the partners and other stakeholders can guide the partnership through the implementation phase.

Another challenge is recognizing what has come before in the provision of employment services in the local community and what tensions currently exist among the key partners and stakeholders. For example, have key advocate groups gone public in their dissatisfaction with public agencies over perceived failures in the current employment service process? Are community service providers resistant to participating in the employment partnership because they perceive that current funding levels are insufficient to provide needed services? Have multiple efforts been tried previously without success to develop viable employment partnerships, leaving stakeholders skeptical about current efforts? Again, an effective strategic planning process can provide an opportunity for stakeholders to air their concerns and clear the air of tensions.

It is clear from the above challenges that each collaborative initiative is built on a unique set of factors. These factors can involve the local history among the partnering agencies, tensions that might exist between key partners, opportunities for improving employment outcomes embodied in the potential partnership, and the role of individuals with disabilities and their families and advocates. The earlier examples of collaborative partnerships taken from the work of the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards demonstrate that potential partners are not limited to public agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, the local Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities agency, the Education Authority, the Employment Program, and/or Community Colleges. There is not one key community agency that is charged with lead responsibility for forming collaborative partnerships. Leadership comes from investment in the purpose of the partnership and the ability to draw-in the key collaborators needed to successfully accomplish the intended outcome. In some instances, this lead could be a public agency; in others it might be a local advocacy group who is championing the partnership effort.



How do an agency's missions, policies, production standards, and timetables impact the ability of multiple agencies to collaborate?



Effective collaborative partners understand the various missions, policies, production standards, and timetables for each of the partnering agencies. Among public agencies, there can be differences over eligibility determination practices, fiscal responsibilities, and duration of services. These differences can be particularly problematic for the partnership when it goes to fill existing gaps in services, such as maintaining employment supports for an extended period after employment. There can be different views on service delivery models, a particularly critical concern when a key partner will not endorse a service model favored by other key partners.

There can also be differences in performance goals where, for example, employment outcomes are not a driving force in the performance standards of a key stakeholder. Finally, there can be overlaps in perceived authority. These bureaucratic forces can cause havoc in interagency efforts and must be addressed early on in the partnership by keeping a clear focus on the intended outcomes of the partnership and the proven strategies that can help achieve those outcomes.



What are the primary strategies to follow in establishing effective collaborative partnerships focused on achieving competitive employment outcomes?



Effective collaborative partnerships promote actions that both improve personal outcomes for those receiving services and foster positive change in the systems that influence these services. The Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston completed a research study on interagency partnerships (Butterworth, Foley, & Metzel, 2001). This study identified a series of quality indicators for effective strategies in forming effective interagency partnerships. For each of these quality indicators, there are a series of self-evaluation questions a partnership can use to identify its areas of strength and needed improvement. The questions focus on determining the extent to which each indicator is fully or partially in-place. For those indicators that are not fully in-place, follow-up actions can be identified and initiated. This self-evaluation can be used as a planning tool during the development of partnership and for periodic reviews in monitoring the partnership's role and effectiveness. The following presents examples of self-evaluation review questions for each of the indicators.

Indicator 1 - The partnership has a clearly defined purpose:

Purpose is operationally defined by having clearly identified outcomes and a data collection system in place to measure the intended outcomes. The outcome measures should emphasize quality of services and outcomes.

Indicator 2 - Allies to the partnership are identified and involved with the collaborative effort:

Allies to a partnership are both internal and external. Internal allies within the partnership must be identified. These internal allies are the stakeholders involved in the planning and implementation of the partnership. Support is also needed from external allies who need to ensure political support for the partnership. Allies to the partnership have a common interest in its purpose and a commitment to its success. Successful partnerships frequently have champions among their external allies who serve as key sponsors and advocates.

Indicator 3 - The collaborators are committed to the partnership and exercise ownership in carrying out its activities:

Ownership comes in part from identifying an individual from each partnering agency or program who is responsible for the implementation and success of the partnership. Inconsistent and/or rotating participation from partnering agencies will destroy the development of any real sense of ownership.

Indicator 4 - The partnership leads to actions and outcomes consistent with the defined purpose:

Having specific action plans in place where tasks are well-defined drives action-oriented partnerships. Action-oriented partnerships also have needed resources committed. These resources are both the time of the partners, particularly among the designated representatives, and in kind or monetary support.

Indicator 5 - Mechanisms are in place to communicate values and resolve differences:

Effective partnerships have organizational values that are identified and incorporated into action plans focused on meeting the interests and support needs of consumers. For example, an organizational value for a partnership focused on employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities could be a zero-reject approach to the consumer population, meaning that any person who ex-

presses any interest in employment is given an opportunity. Effective partnerships also have mechanisms in place to resolve disagreements.

These five quality indicators can be extremely useful both in forming a partnership and in monitoring and continually improving an existing partnership. Conscientious use of these indicators helps keep a partnership goal and action oriented.

Q What are the employment supports that should be the focus of the collaborative partnership?

A The first support is ongoing advocacy and commitment to the goal of employment.

This comes in part from setting an organizational climate and culture that clearly advocates for work. Competitive employment is the focal point of the employment service. Success at work is encouraged, and job-threatening issues are addressed aggressively.

The second support is facilitating employment.

Practical assistance is provided focused specifically on employment. Employment is an integral part of the integrated approach to rehabilitation services, meaning that the same workers, the same team and the same agencies work together to help the person to succeed at work, as they do for other needs.

The third support is a clear emphasis on consumer preferences and strengths.

Rapid assistance is provided when a consumer is interested in working. Supports respond to people's personal interests, goals, and preferences. Where jobs do not exist that match preferences, the supports include working with employers to develop customized job opportunities.

The fourth support is ongoing, flexible and individualized assistance provided as needed.

This includes workplace accommodations, job coaching, supportive counseling, off-site assistance, and support groups linked to other community supports, like medication monitoring, case management and housing. On-going assessments of support needs are conducted after the person is on the job. On-going assessment of the workplace environment takes place, and modifications of the workplace environment occur as needed.

The final support example is job replacement assistance.

Work in jobs in the competitive labor market helps the consumer learn more about what she or he wants from employment. Job replacement assistance encourages building towards a better match between the person's

strengths and desires compared to the job characteristics. A key characteristic of continuous support for individuals with significant disabilities is assistance in planned moves to better, more lucrative, and more fulfilling jobs.

Q What are the potential benefits of effective collaborative community partnerships?

A To be effective, collaborative community partnerships must result in improved employment related outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. There are a variety of employment outcome benefits. The first benefit is improvement in the timeliness and quality of the services provided. The second benefit is improved employment outcomes. How do collaborators know whether these potential benefits are being realized? The answer is to set up an information system that allows the partners on a regular basis to accurately assess the outcomes being achieved. Successful partnerships lead to action and outcomes. Without dependable and timely information on service and employment outcomes, the partners will not be able to accurately identify either the strengths of the collaborative effort or the continuing issues that need to be addressed.

Q What are the examples of data measures that give important consumer satisfaction information on services and outcomes?

- A**
- 1. Time waiting for services:**
A consumer stuck on a waiting list or given delayed appointments for services will quickly lose interest. Waiting lists are sometimes used because of funding and/or staff shortfalls. Reducing waiting lists and time delays in accessing services are critical initial focal points of a partnership targeting improved employment outcomes.
 - 2. Time between intake and job placement:**
Rapid movement to employment is a key to improved employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. Movement to employment can be delayed by a variety of factors, such as overemphasis on temporary work experiences or staff difficulties in helping consumers match to an appropriate job. Just like time delays in initiating services, time delays between intake and job placement can cause frustration for the consumer and lead to high dropout rates. Partners need to regularly measure the time between intake and placement and take action if that time is regularly exceeding 30-45 days.
 - 3. Number of persons assessed but not placed:**
Programs can sometimes find themselves providing assessment services to a much higher number of people than those who actually start working. Assessments are important, but assessments without job outcomes are a waste of resource and symptomatic of a problem the partners need to address. Maybe there are staff development issues where staff is unsure about approaching employers; maybe the job placement service is understaffed. Tracking the number of persons who are assessed but not placed is critically important in assessing the quality of employment-focused partnership.
 - 4. Number of persons achieving employment outcomes and wages earned:**
An increase in the number of persons achieving the targeted employment outcomes is the primary indicator of a successful partnership. It is the most critical outcome measure

and must be tracked closely if the partnership is truly committed to measuring its success. It is also important that wages earned by consumers are tracked. If high employment outcome rates are dependent on frequent use of low paying job opportunities, the partnership needs to concentrate attention on improving wage outcomes.

5. Number of persons successful in first job placement and number moving to subsequent employment opportunities:

Movement from a first to subsequent job placements is not a sign of failure in the first job. For many individuals who are either new to the job market or who are working on reentering the job market, the first job experience can be a trial work experience. The lessons learned from that first placement can help in improve subsequent job matches and support plans. However, a constant turn over in first jobs can also be a sign that staff is struggling with the job development process. It is important for partners to know the success rate in first job placements so that fact-based decisions can be made about staff development activities and allotment of staff resources.

Summary

A final comment on effective collaborative community partnerships: Successful partnerships have a clear mission, focus on actions that produce intended outcomes, and consistently track and evaluate their impact. Partnerships with an employment mission for individuals with significant disabilities must focus their attention on the timeliness and quality of both services delivered and job outcomes achieved. Employment service and outcome data are critical to the partnership in determining the extent that it is successfully fulfilling its mission.

Additional Resources

Butterworth, J., Foley, S., & Metzler, D. (2001). Developing interagency agreements: Four questions to consider. *The Institute Brief*, *11* (1). Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Wehman, P., Revell, W. G., & Brooke, V. (2003). Competitive employment: Has it become the "first choice" yet? *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, *14* (3), pp. 163-173.

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For more information on T-TAP and additional fact sheets on customized employment please visit:

<http://www.t-tap.org>