



State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies As Change Agents

Systems Change Information Bulletin #8:

The Role of State VR Agencies in Workforce Investment Systems: Creating a Universally Accessible and Seamless System that Meets the Needs of Persons with Disabilities

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Prepared by*

Robert "Bobby" Silverstein, Center for the Study and Advancement of Disability Policy

Email: Bobby@CSADP.org;
www.disabilitypolicycenter.org

Allen Jensen, Work Incentives Project, Center for Health Services Research and Policy

The George Washington University
Email: ahoaci@gwumc.edu;
www.medicaidbuyin.org

In Partnership with the Research and Training Center on Employment Policy for People with Disabilities
Law, Health Policy and Disability Center
at the

University of Iowa College of Law
<http://disability.law.uiowa.edu>

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This is the 8th in a series of INFORMATION BULLETINS on the general topic of State VR agencies serving as systems change agents. In addition to the primary role of providing VR services to persons with disabilities (particularly those with the most significant disabilities), Congress expects that State VR agencies will perform the role of change agent within the state to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. The INFORMATION BULLETINS are located at the following website:

http://disability.law.uiowa.edu/lhpdc/rrtc/vr_syschange/. The CSAVR website includes a link to this website.

The purpose of SYSTEMS CHANGE INFORMATION BULLETIN #8 is to describe selected initiatives by State VR agencies to enhance employment opportunities through:

- Collaboration with **One-Stop Centers** and other entities participating in the workforce investment system;
- Participation in the **Disability Program Navigator Initiative** sponsored by the Social Security Administration and the Employment and Training Administration in the U.S. Department of Labor; and
- Adoption of **customized employment** strategies for meeting the needs of persons with significant disabilities and other experiencing multiple barriers to employment supported by grants from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in the U.S. Department of Labor.

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FACILITATING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GENERIC WORKFORCE INVESTMENT SYSTEM

Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 (P.L. 105-220), State VR agencies are expected to operate as an “integral part of a statewide workforce investment system.” As mandatory partners, State VR agencies are required to enter into “memoranda of understanding” with workforce agencies. One-Stop centers are expected to provide physical and programmatic access for persons with disabilities by complying with Section 188 of WIA (nondiscrimination/equal opportunity), including the Section WIA 188 Disability Checklist.

Around the country State VR agencies are assuming leadership roles in facilitating physical and programmatic accessibility at One-Stop centers, including all aspects of the operation of these Centers—outreach, intake, screening and assessment, service delivery, evaluation, and operations/management. Examples of approaches used by State VR agencies include:

- Establishing an interagency collaborative work group concerned with policy development and capacity building
- Developing and using self-assessment and monitoring tools relating to physical and programmatic accessibility
- Developing strategies for screening for hidden disabilities
- Developing web-based training materials for certifying One-Stop Center staff competencies in serving persons with disabilities
- Providing funding for auxiliary aids and services
- Piloting promising practices and then replicating these practices statewide
- Developing practices that facilitate the implementation of a seamless system which includes expedited service delivery.

California

In California, the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) was instrumental in creating the Universal Access Workgroup and implementing the Workforce Investment Resources and Accommodations Project.

The **Universal Access Workgroup** (UAWG) is an interagency collaborative work group of the California Workforce Investment Board (CWIB)¹. The primary focus of the UAWG is policy development and capacity building related to programmatic and physical access issues for individuals with disabilities in the workforce development system. The work of the UAWG is designed to assist State and local governments, One Stop Operators, and Local Workforce Investment Boards to integrate the access requirements of non-discrimination law into the local One Stop systems.

¹ Members of the Universal Access Workgroup (UAWG) include staff from the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), Employment Development Department (EDD), Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, and Governor’s Committee to Employ Persons with Disabilities, Department of Social Services, California Department of Education (CDE), LA Conservation Corps, California Workforce Association, Civil Rights Bureau, Legal Aid Society, consumer representatives and One-Stop Directors.

The UAWG enacted:

- The development and release of a comprehensive physical access self-assessment process. This tool was released to the One-Stop Centers May 2002. This tool is considered to be a first step in assisting One-Stops to become physically and programmatically accessible to customers with disabilities.
- The Learning Disabled Workgroup which identifies strategies and methods for One-Stop staff to utilize when working with people with this disability and other hidden disabilities.

Contact: Michelle Alford-Williams malfordw@dor.ca.gov

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Workforce Investment Grant (WIG) Round II was awarded to the California Department of Rehabilitation in coordination with the California Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and a consortium of partners.² The grant funded the **Workforce Investment Resources and Accommodations Project (WRAP)**. Over a 30-month period the WRAP developed a 15 semester-hour training certificate training for the Workforce Accommodation Specialist Program (WASP). WASP provides continuing education for new personnel who will be serving as specialists for consumers with disabilities and employers available through the One-Stop career center system. Currently, thirteen participants graduated from the program at San Diego State University. The WRAP was established prior to the Disability Program Navigator Initiative and the training and information developed was used as a basis for California for the SSA/DOL Navigator Grant. Three WASP graduates have been hired in their local areas as Disability Program Navigator. In addition, funding (\$158,000) is provided for the provision of auxiliary aids and services with the One-Stop system with ongoing consultation and technical assistance services. Contact: Michelle Alford-Williams malfordw@dor.ca.gov

Iowa

In Iowa strong collaboration among state agencies interested in strengthening employment services to lowans with disabilities has resulted in the creation of a “**Governance Group**” of seven agency leaders³ who meet on a quarterly basis. The **Iowa** VR agency facilitates the activities of the group that in 2003 developed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) designed to establish an on-going commitment to collaboration at all levels of service delivery. The MOA continues to provide a foundation for collaboration and ongoing resources to local administrative and service staff as well as a providing a forum for sharing current and future best practices among partners who are working to strengthen employment services to lowans with disabilities.

In 2000 –2003 a successful systems change **pilot project** in Sioux City was monitored by the partner agencies of the Iowa’s Governance Group. The lessons learned from the project demonstrated a potential statewide model for providing services to

² The partners included: the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC); the Employment Development Department (EDD); California’s Community College’s Chancellors Office; The World Institute on Disability (WID); San Diego University; and the California Workforce Association (CWA).

³ The group includes the Iowa VR agency, the Department of the Blind, Workforce Development, Department of Human Rights, Department of Human Services, Department of Education, and the Developmental Disabilities Council.

participants, who due to disability were also eligible for VR services.

As a result of collaborative efforts between the State VR Agency, State Workforce agency, and the State agency responsible for human services, the partner agencies are now replicating key strategies of the pilot project in eight locations throughout the state. The strategies currently being implemented include:

- Developing the capacity within Iowa One-Stop workforce systems to address the needs of job seekers with hidden disabilities, including the education of One-Stop service staff, about disability and collaborative planning
- Identifying participants with hidden disabilities; and
- Providing a broader range of accommodated services; and
- Achieving stronger self-sufficiency outcomes for these participants.

For more information contact Stephen Wooderson (email: Stephen.Wooderson@iowa.gov)

Utah

In 2001, Utah established the Memorandum of Understanding to Support Employment (MOUSE) Committee. This Committee includes the **Utah** VR agency and the Utah DOL agency (the Department of Workforce Services--UI, TANF, Wagner Peyser services). The focus of the Committee is to proactively address the objectives of the mandated MOU between the agencies. Addressed were the areas of:

- Pathways (e.g., regional and statewide best practices/areas for improvement identification, establishing a process pattern in each agency for received referrals based on shared forms)
- Cross-training (e.g., web-site based materials, including “solutions” page)
- Information/Data Sharing (e.g., data systems linkages, emphasis to staff on confidentiality of shared data elements))
- Accessibility (e.g., review for accessibility under Section 188, website based linkages to ADA coordinators)
- Employer Relations (e.g., establishment of “supply-side” program specialist position, launch Governor’s Committee website).

Additionally, the Utah State VR Agency, in partnership with the Utah Department of Workforce Services, established a “Choose to Work” (CTW) initiative. The purpose of the CTW Initiative provides individualized job development and job placement to eligible job seekers with disabilities. The CTW program is a statewide program jointly administered and funded by the State VR agency and the Department of Workforce Services. The CTW program placement specialists are located in both agencies and cross-serve clients/customers of both agencies. CTW staff are shared between the agencies and they take referrals from both. For more information contact Russ Thelin (email: rthelin@utah.gov).

Wisconsin

The **Wisconsin** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (WDVR) is pursuing several strategies to increase integration and accessibility for persons with disabilities in the workforce investment system in general and the One-Stop Career Centers in particular. WDVR initiated its efforts in the mid 1980's, before enactment of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) by co-locating into One-Stop Job Centers in a few counties and insisting on program and physical accessibility in those centers. WDVR's efforts have accelerated and expanded since enactment of WIA, especially since a One-Stop Job Center cannot be certified as a Comprehensive Job Center, unless a VR agency participates as a mandatory partner.

WDVR, recognizing the need for inclusion and accessibility for ALL persons with disabilities in One-Stop Job Centers, continues to work directly and through the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) towards universal access to all of Wisconsin's 75 Job Centers, including individuals with the most the most significant disabilities. In Wisconsin this goal means providing universal access for all services, including the core, intensive, and training services available to nearly 800,000 citizens with disabilities.

Today, Wisconsin DVR is co-located in 30 Comprehensive Centers and has staff assigned or a program presence in an additional 45 satellite sites. The efforts by WDVR and DWD have benefited VR consumers in a number of ways including:

- Increased the programmatic as well as physical access, of persons with disability within the Workforce Investment System.
- Co-location through closer physical proximity to WIA Mandatory "One-Stop Service Delivery" partners has increased interagency communication and corresponding partner service access for VR consumers.
- VR consumers have been able to successfully "cross walk" between agencies resulting in more efficient and greater program access.
- WIA agency walls have disappeared through closer partner agency collaboration. resulting in expedited service delivery for persons with disability.

For more information on WDVR's job center partnerships and experience, contact Mike Greco, WDVR Bureau Director of Consumer Services at Michael.greco@dwd.state.wi.us or 608-261-4576.

PARTICIPATION IN THE DISABILITY PROGRAM NAVIGATOR INITIATIVE

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) in the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Social Security Administration (SSA) are jointly funding cooperative agreements establishing the position of the Disability Program Navigator within One-Stop Career Centers. The purpose of this position is to better inform SSA beneficiaries and other people with disabilities about work support programs now available at One-Stop Career Centers. This initiative is developing new/ongoing partnerships to:

- Achieve seamless, comprehensive, and integrated access to services,
- Create systemic changes, and

- Expand the workforce development system's capacity to serve customers with disabilities and employers, including enhancing the linkage between employers and state workforce investment boards through One-Stop Career Centers.

The State WIA administrative agency is responsible for implementing the cooperative agreement supported by the grant. DOL will not fund proposals that subcontract the majority of administration and management to other organizational entities such as State VR agencies. The official website for Disability Program Navigator Initiative grants is www.doleta.gov/disability/new_dpn_grants.cfm. See also <http://disability.law.uiowa.edu>.

New Mexico

The Disability Program Navigator Initiative (DPN) in **New Mexico** is operated by the State VR agency (DVR). The DPN is designed to strengthen connections between disability resources, community, partners, DVR and the New Mexico Workforce Connection Centers. Navigators develop linkages & collaborate on an on-going basis with employers to facilitate job placements for persons with disabilities.

Navigators assist New Mexico Workforce Connection Centers Staff by providing training and other resources to more effectively provide services to individuals with disabilities. As DVR employees, Navigators are able to work with the field staff to effectively provide information about services to consumers and in addition, refer individuals that would be eligible for Title I services. The cross connection between WIA services and VR services is very beneficial to the community. Navigators work with individuals and others to promote employment and careers; train staff, other partner agencies and others on disability issues; work with employers to help understand ADA and reasonable accommodations; provide information about Social Security, TANF, Housing and other community resources that may be affected by earnings.

Navigators are challenging the lack of coordination and collaboration that exists within the community. Working to create a system that will provide a service to an individual has been helped with the implementation of SHARE NETWORK NEW MEXICO, an online database of community and faith based organizations that allow anyone with access to a computer the ability to find resources in their county. Through SHARE Network, job seekers and their families can discover a wide range of support services. Information regarding these resources is available through an online directory that brings together all service providers (including grassroots non-profits and government) who specifically support an individual's entrance, success and/or advancement in employment. Organizations become SHARE Network members by registering online at www.sharenetworknm.org. During the registration process, participating organizations list the services they offer, their hours of operation and contact information.

Individuals are able to search online for assistance by county, type of service and/or name of the service provider. Customers are able to access SHARE Network from their home, library, school or any of New Mexico's One-Stop centers. As an online resource, SHARE Network will be continually updated. Share Network members are able to update their own services at any time, and are periodically reminded via e-mail to review their entries. Through SHARE Network, government agencies, faith-based organizations and community-based organizations are able to increase awareness of their services and learn what other organizations offer. For more information contact Mary Modrow (mary.modrow@nm.us).

Mississippi

The **Mississippi** Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) handles the day-to-day operations of the state's Disability Program Navigator (DPN) Initiative as well as supervision of the program's Navigators. Although DOL mentioned in the original Request for Proposals that they would not fund proposals that subcontract the majority of administration and management to other organizational entities such as State VR agencies, an exception was made for Mississippi at the request of the State WIA administrative agency, the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, because of the extensive history of successful collaboration that exists between the two state agencies.

The purpose of the DPN Initiative is to increase the access that customers, including individuals with disabilities, have to workforce development services available through Mississippi's network of Workforce Investment Network (WIN) Job Centers. The Navigator's role is to improve the coordination, collaboration, and service delivery practices among WIN system partners for customers with barriers to employment. Mississippi's Navigators accomplish the program goals by effectively imparting partner program and service information to WIN Job Center customers and staff, facilitating referrals to partner programs, providing or facilitating staff training, assisting in the development of a case management model for the state's workforce system, and improving job opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Currently in its third program year, the Mississippi DPN Project has accomplished or is working on the following initiatives:

- Addressing transportation as a barrier to employment in the most rural areas of the state by actively participating in transportation committees to develop action plans in coordination with the Mississippi Department of Transportation and the United We Ride Project, an initiative of the Community Transportation Association of America;
- Developed Resource Guides to be utilized by WIN Job Center staff as well as available to the community regarding area service providers including updating service provider information to the state's United Way 2-1-1 project;
- Developed and currently facilitating training modules on disability-related topics for WIN Job Center staff;
- Purchased, installed, and trained WIN Job Center staff on TTY machines and accessible computer workstations with adaptive software;
- Participating in a pilot project to establish team-based case management in a WIN Job Center;
- Developed linkages between the state's workforce system and the state's mental health system, which had not previously existed;
- Collaborating in the WIN system to create an employer resource room in a WIN Job Center;
- Helped to establish a community resource council providing community service providers the opportunity to network and share program information;
- Working to incorporate the customized employment concept within the WIN system;
- Collaborating with MDRS, the Mississippi Department of Education and the state's workforce system to increase the number of transitioning youth served in the WIN Job Centers;

- Collaborating with the Mississippi Department of Human Services and the state's workforce system to increase the state's work participation rate for TANF clients; and,
- Collaborating within the state's workforce system to participate in the development of the training curriculum and provide possible disability-related training at the newly established Mississippi One-Stop University.

For more information contact C. Broadhead (email: cbroadhead@mdrs.state.ms.us).

Arizona

In 2003, The **Arizona** Rehabilitation Services Administration (AZRSA) applied for and received the Disability Program Navigator Initiative (DPN) Grant. The Arizona DPN program was small at first with funding for salaries and employment related expenses for 8 positions. The first two Navigators were hired and only one was trained for the position. The DPN coordinator was also the Ticket to Work coordinator for RSA and started the first Employment Network Association which began partnerships with MOUs to have shared and joint cases for Ticket to Work and RSA consumers. The DPN coordinator was able to find support to hire and house Navigators in the One-Stop Centers without money for occupancy, supplies, travel and training. This was the key for the system change and collaboration to take place and a bridge was built to coordinate, collaborate and facilitate.

The second year saw major accessibility barriers removed in One-Stop centers. The establishment of the Equal Opportunity Administrator has made a significant improvement into the access issues and support for the Navigators. The impact of the DPN program has seriously started a movement to remove barriers. In addition, teams were established of trainers, Assistive Technology specialist, Internet Technologist, and financial support to make sure that equipment purchased was in fact used by trained staff instead of left in un-opened boxes in a closet.

Arizona RSA has build an accessible website <http://www.atarizona.com> which includes pictures, maps and directions, online training, feedback, current events, linkages, resources, and locations of One Stops, providers and partners. The website captures the effort of the training, and accessibility with all the partners and the special populations who need the services to find and secure services to find suitable employment.

Today the Navigator grant for DOL has 16 Navigator positions and the IGA funds 3.5 positions for a total of 19.5 navigators. The professional Navigator has been accepted as a change agent and bridge to improve services to persons with disabilities in One-Stop Centers. The Navigator program has shown the worth and impart of bringing the partners, employers, board members, resources, accessibility, training, and information to everyone. Sustaining the Navigator program is being consider as a priority by AZRSA and the WIA partnership and has been identified in the State Strategic Plan as a program for improving services integration. For more information contact John Swearengin (email: JSwearengin@axdes.gov)

PARTICIPATION IN CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT GRANTS

Selected State VR agencies have been involved in the implementation of Customized Employment grants sponsored by The Office of Disability Employment Policy in the U.S. Department of Labor (ODEP). ODEP has supported 20 Customized Employment grants throughout the country. The customized employment process is a flexible blend of strategies,

services, and supports designed to increase employment options for job seekers with complex needs through voluntary negotiation of the employment relationship with the employer. The job seeker is the primary source of information and drives the process. The customized employment process begins with an exploration phase, which lays the foundation for employment planning. Planning results in a blueprint for the job search where an employment relationship is negotiated to meet the needs of both the job seeker and the employer.

Time spent engaging with the job seeker to explore their unique needs, abilities, and interests, as well as their complexities, is essential to establishing successful employment. Unlike traditional testing or standardized assessment, Customized Employment engages the job seeker in controlling the exploration process, and captures their preferences and connections in the community. At the conclusion of the exploration phase, the job seeker makes decisions about their employment goals and potential employers to approach. Information gathered from the exploration process is the foundation for Customized Employment planning, which should result in a blueprint for the job search. There are numerous tools—including profiles and portfolios—that can be used to capture, organize, and represent the information that is collected during exploration and planning.

An essential element in Customized Employment is negotiating job duties and employee expectations to align the skills and interests of a job seeker to the needs of an employer. This negotiation results in a job description that outlines a customized relationship between the employer and employee. Options for customizing a job description include job carving, negotiating a new job description, job creation, and job sharing. Other points of potential negotiation include job supports, the hours or location of the job, or specifics of supervision. For more information about Customized Employment see ODEP's website www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/cust_emp.htm

Alaska

In **Alaska**, effective Customized Employment (CE) strategies have taken hold throughout the workforce system within seven job centers and surrounding communities with additional expansion planned. The list of partners who have adopted the use of this customized wrap-around CE service approach include State VR agency (DVR) as the CE grant lead, along with their one-stop agencies, several school districts, IL centers and various community agencies throughout Alaska. The One-Stop serves as a community resource hub where customers access these services. These services have also taken root in various schools, IL centers and even by our public assistance welfare to work programs where CE is the foundation for their "Family Centered Services" (FCS) approach. As a result of Alaska's outstanding results from this initiative, ODEP provided national recognition and continued funding support despite a large federal funding cut that eliminated most of the other 29 CE projects across the U.S.

Alaska DVR also played a large role in helping develop and implement their recent Disability Program Navigator (DPN) grant which the state division of employment securing, Alaska's one-stop operator, has since taken lead on throughout 7 job-centers in Alaska. This project came in close alignment with building on the best practices and lesson's learned from the CE project above. Alaska DVR now plays a close supportive role in helping ensure this project results in a long-term sustainable benefit for our customers throughout Alaska.

This fall, Alaska was awarded a self-employment capacity building grant from the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) that targets individuals with disabilities. As above, this project is also being implemented as part of Alaska's overall one-stop workforce system improvement initiative. Similar to the DPN & CE projects above, Alaska DVR played a major role in helping compose, implement and coordinate these services within the larger workforce system.

Alaska's workforce leaders implemented a new "Job-Center Service Integration Committee" that represents the major one-stop related leadership throughout Alaska. This committee is helping guide, support and develop the infrastructure necessary for these and other similar seamless oriented service initiatives so it's part of Alaska's sustainable workforce system in providing seamless delivery. Alaska DVR continues to play a major role in this evolution.

For more information about Alaska VR agency's experience implementing Customized Employment strategies, contact Gale Sinnott at Gale.Sinnott@labor.state.ak.us.

Indiana

In Indiana, the customized employment grantee in Indianapolis, worked with the **Indiana** VR agency to modify their policies to cover the cost of customized employment services. Through the development of Purchase of Service Agreements between the State VR agency and specific qualified community rehabilitation providers who are competent in Customized Employment services, cost sharing is being realized. VR is financially absorbing the cost of service for eligible individuals who require customized employment strategies to obtain employment. For more information contact Michael Hedden (email: Michael.Hedden@fssa.in.gov).