



Explore VR

Vocational Rehabilitation Partnering with
Community Rehabilitation Programs in Business
Engagement and Employer Support

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2017

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This is a product of the Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC). The JD-VRTAC is based at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at UMass Boston, and is part of ExploreVR (www.explorevr.org), the data hub for a group of vocational rehabilitation research projects at ICI. The JD-VRTAC is funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), US Department of Education, under grant #H264A140002.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the US Department of Education. No official endorsement by the US Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

The information presented is a combination of anecdotal information offered by various state representatives at the CRP Forum and insights and impressions of the authors based on years of technical assistance experience to VR agencies and CRPs. This is not a rigorous field research study.

Suggested citation:

Vocational Rehabilitation Partnering with Community Rehabilitation Programs in Business Engagement and Employer Support (2017), Ford, L., Mitchell, D., Marrone, J, Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

www.exploreVR.org





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INTRODUCTION

State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are key providers of services for individuals with disabilities seeking employment. VR agencies conduct business engagement activities in a variety of ways, including having dedicated VR staff in business engagement or job placement roles, and contracting with community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). This document summarizes discussions and presentations from a forum held in December 2016, and reviews some issues and strategies involved in the VR–CRP partnership for business engagement and employer support.

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Although there are exceptions, most state VR agencies contract with CRPs to provide job development and support for VR consumers. In some cases, this involves contracting for dedicated CRP staff as part of the VR office (as in Minnesota and Vermont). More often, VR counselors contract for specific services to be provided to specific customers, paying on an hourly basis or upon the completion of milestones and outcomes. Many of these CRPs also provide services funded through the state developmental disabilities (DD) and/or mental health (MH) agencies. Often, VR pays for the initial job development and placement, and DD/MH pays for extended support.

There are many advantages to contracting out these services. Many state VR agencies would find it difficult or impossible to hire enough state employees to provide needed services. VR counselors often have large caseloads (100 individuals or more), and don't have time to invest in job exploration or development. This is even more true in states where the VR agency is in Order of Selection, and must prioritize applicants with the most significant disabilities.

CRP staff are often out in the community contacting businesses on behalf of DD or MH clients. VR can take advantage of these relationships and piggyback on business engagement and job support activities that other funding sources pay for. Milestone/outcome payment systems may limit VR's financial risk, since the outlay of financial support is limited until after the placement outcome is achieved.

In addition, contracting out services can help VR control costs, since personnel are only paid for when they are serving VR customers. Internal job placement staff generally represent costs, even when there are no clients ready for their services.

There are also disadvantages to these arrangements. When contractors provide job development activities, VR involvement in the process is often invisible to businesses that are hiring VR participants. This may not matter to the business, which cares only about getting access to a qualified employee or labor pool, but it limits VR's access and value to the business community at a time when VR needs business visibility to stay competitive and document value.

In addition, businesses are often approached by professionals representing many different applicant pools (America's Job Centers, school-to-work transition programs, immigrant employment programs, etc.), and express frustration with the perceived duplication of services. If VR does contact businesses directly, they may be seen as just one more social service program looking for assistance.



Whether the VR agency is paying for services via milestones and/or outcomes, or paying on a fee-for-service basis, it is necessary to negotiate a mutually acceptable level of VR influence on the process, rather than just authorizing payments based on brief progress reports. In other words, the VR counselor must maintain involvement with the case even after the referral is made, and oversee the provision of needed services.

Quality control of CRP services can be an issue. Most CRPs have high turnover and may not consistently provide services at a professional level. Many CRPs get the bulk of their funding from DD or MH, and may not be responsive to VR concerns or provide adequate information in a timely manner. In a recent study of 45 CRPs providing services under contract with the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, DVR revenues represented an average of 27% of agency income, with a range of 100% to less than 1%.¹ CRPs that have limited referrals and income from VR are unlikely to see the agency as an important partner or customer.

In some situations, it may be difficult to find CRP resources. In many states, CRPs have the option to decline to work with customers who don't seem "ready," especially in outcome-based payment systems where the CRP has to make a business decision whether or not to serve a specific individual. Many rural and remote areas have no CRPs, or the existing CRPs offer only services that may not match those needed.

It is also difficult in many areas to find qualified CRP resources to serve low-incidence populations, such as people who are blind/visually impaired or deaf/blind, or limited English speakers. Internal VR resources may be better equipped to provide the specialized services needed.

The need for VR agencies to renegotiate and strengthen relationships with CRPs has never been greater. The passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) and the regulations subsequently published in 2016 added more pressure for VR agencies to increase their involvement with the business community.

Under WIOA, all workforce partners, including VR, are expected to provide services to businesses and report on those services as part of the state performance evaluation. CRPs are generally already involved in providing business services, and in many locations are already integrated into the workforce development system, providing more reasons for VR to coordinate efforts with the existing network. WIOA also requires increased VR involvement in customized employment and supported employment, services that are generally provided by CRP staff.

In December 2016, the Job-Driven VR Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC) and the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC) co-sponsored a forum, *Partnering with CRPs in Business Engagement and Employer Support*, to allow representatives from 30 VR agencies (and a few CRPs) to share challenges and strategies. The next section of this white paper summarizes the presentations and discussions that arose from this meeting. It outlines information across 6 themes that emerged from the forum discussions, followed by presentations of different partnership approaches used by 5 VR agencies.

¹ Comparison of Actual CRP Costs of Providing Services and Fees Paid for Services. Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, February 2016. Unpublished study by Dr. David Vandergoot and Laurie Ford.



The key themes from the meeting are:

Challenge 1: Building communication/collaboration; confidentiality and competition

Challenge 2: CRP accreditation/staff certification/training/development

Challenge 3: CRP quality/evaluation/score cards/profiles/consumer choice

Challenge 4: VR–CRP payment structures and business engagement

Challenge 5: CRPs in remote areas

Challenge 6: Strategic and innovative approaches to business engagement

Challenge 1: Building communication/collaboration; confidentiality and competition

Historically, VR agencies have collaborated with CRPs to place people with disabilities into meaningful employment. However, in recent years more VR agencies have hired new internal staff who are responsible for business relations duties, or added business relations duties to existing staff members. In some instances, this creates two groups of staff with similar job responsibilities — some internal to VR, and some external through CRPs — resulting in a greater need to increase communication and collaboration between the two groups.

Emphasizing that the ultimate goal from all perspectives is employment for consumers will establish a common ground to get buy-in from both parties. This goal also can begin a conversation about strategies to decrease competition, and ways to build more meaningful relationships with employers and create better job options for clients.

Building a trusting environment is key for meaningful information exchanges to take place between CRPs and business relations staff. Due to the nature of their work, staff who specialize in building relationships with businesses can be hesitant to share information about their business contacts or job opportunities that are available to clients. To alleviate some of this competition, VR leadership must create a culture that emphasizes rewarding teams vs. individuals for consumer placements, for example, holding joint meetings among VR counselors, business specialists, and CRPs at referral.

Establishing a team approach to placing candidates encourages more coordination amongst the multiple players who are vital to a client's success in an employment opportunity. Often, it is the VR agency that will have to provide the leadership and set an example of sharing resources and credit for success.

A team approach that includes front-line staff in the planning process is also essential to developing a talent pipeline for businesses. Getting to know a candidate's strengths and skills relevant to available job opportunities should lead to more rapid and successful placements. However, managing confidential information about any candidate's disability or circumstances can make this level of information-sharing a challenge. Well-established trusting relationships and attention to informed consent on the part of the applicant make it possible to share this information.

[Labor market information](#) (LMI) can also contribute to successful job placement. LMI comprises characteristics and availability of occupations, wage levels, job duties, training and education



requirements, and conditions of employment. Besides a variety of published data sources such as online job postings and federal, state, and local workforce industry trends and demographics, qualitative information about jobs and industry growth can also come from communication with businesses, industry associations, chambers of commerce, and local community members. Therefore, VR and CRP staff also become a source of LMI, which should be shared with all employment staff rapidly and efficiently.

Some VR agencies find that regularly scheduled meetings with opportunities to highlight successes can increase buy-in, since sharing challenges and “stuck cases” can also be a good way to build trust. Others note that face-to-face contact and phone calls are valuable communication strategies; often there is too much reliance on email. One example of this type of collaborative model is Creative Workforce Solutions in Vermont.

[Creative Workforce Solutions](#) (CWS) delivers business services throughout Vermont. CWS operates like a staffing agency to recruit, hire, and place qualified candidates into open positions. It is an initiative of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, and operates based on regional employment teams.

Each regional employment team is represented by a business account manager, whose primary responsibility is consistently serving businesses as customers. This staff member offers free hiring solutions and consulting services to national, statewide, and local businesses. In addition to having CWS as a central point of contact for businesses, Vermont VR also hosts regular [Jobsville](#) meetings focused on rapid communication and coordination between employment staff and VR counselors, and the agency allows everyone involved to get credit for successful placements.

Challenge 2: CRP accreditation/staff certification/training/development

VR agencies vary widely in the level and type of CRP accreditation required for contracted providers. Accreditation of a CRP provides assurance that the agency has appropriate policies, insurance, business licenses, etc. in place, but does not guarantee better outcomes for VR customers. Occasionally the cost of accreditation may present a barrier to recruiting new providers, particularly where the volume of VR business will be low. In some areas there is underuse of CRPs while other areas need CRPs so badly that accreditation requirements have been waived.

A January 2017 survey of 23 state VR agencies showed that 65% required some type of formal accreditation for CRPs, while 35% of responding agencies required none. 13% required accreditation by the Council on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. Other accreditation resources included the National Accreditation Council for Agencies Serving People with Blindness or Visual Impairment, Council on Quality Leadership, Joint Commission, Rehabilitation Services Accreditation System, Council on Accreditation, state DD or MH agencies, and internal VR agency accreditation processes.

Requirements for staff certification and training are perhaps even more problematic. It is unusual to have academic requirements beyond high school for CRP staff (excepting MH providers). Most CRPs pay direct service staff poorly, experience high turnover rates, and hesitate to invest resources in staff development, especially if the CRP may be serving only a few VR participants. VR agency requirements for CRP staff serving VR customers range from mandatory training on a specified curriculum provided by a college or other third party, to mandatory training provided by the VR



agency, to no requirements at all.

These examples illustrate the varied roles VR agencies can take in supporting training for CRP providers:

- » Minnesota VR Services provides a 3-day CRP training (Placement 101), which addresses partnering with client and businesses to meet needs, and offers an overview of VR services. After the training, there are monthly meetings of placement area teams (both VR staff and CRPs) for ongoing support.
- » Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation worked with a contractor to develop 13 self-study online modules on topics ranging from developmental disabilities to the history of VR. These must be completed within 90 days by any contractor working with VR customers. Similarly, the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services used a contractor to develop training webinars which have been available on the agency's website (though they are being updated and are temporarily unavailable).
- » Vermont, Alaska, Utah, and other states use a standardized approach by working with entities that provide training approved by ACRE (the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators).² For example, Vermont contracts with a community college to provide free, mandatory training leading to a certificate of completion from ACRE. Alaska DVR requires the ACRE certificate from their vendors, but does not provide financial support to CRPs taking the training. Utah State Office of Rehabilitation collaborates with the state chapter of the National Rehabilitation Association and Utah State University to provide ACRE training, and also requires proof of continuing education from CRP staff.
- » Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired provides a 2-day intensive training on the needs of their population.
- » Maine DVR contracts with a technical assistance and training provider to administer a comprehensive workforce development system for employment specialists in the CRP sector. This project, Employment for ME Workforce Development System, includes basic certification (ACRE) training, advanced topical skills training, maintenance of a comprehensive training calendar, and a mentoring program for newly certified employment specialists.

Many VR agencies report that it is difficult to get CRPs to do required training, let alone extra or ongoing training. To quote one forum participant, "There seems to be a struggle with vendors attempting to find loopholes in contracts in order to avoid required training." Medicaid waivers require that providers be paid on a "billable hour" basis, so that time spent in training means forfeiting potential CRP income.

Staff from the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation hoped that with a move to milestone payments, CRPs would increase salaries and pay job developers more, but that did not happen. Often the best job developers move up in the agency or move on (some becoming VR counselors or assistants). CRPs may have difficulty hiring qualified staff to fill positions, which limits their ability to take on new clients.

2 <http://www.acreducators.org>



Challenge 3: CRP quality/evaluation/score cards/profiles/consumer choice

Another area of difficulty for VR agencies is how to evaluate the quality of CRP services and share that information with consumers so that they can make an informed choice. Common methods of evaluating services include file reviews, surveys of VR counselors making referrals to the CRP, and surveys of consumers being served by the CRP. It is unusual for VR agencies to solicit feedback from businesses involved with the CRP (though many CRPs do this for their own purposes). Rhode Island VR uses a focus group approach where they interview 2 of the CRPs' clients and 2 VR counselors to see how the CRP is doing.

One of the first obstacles to developing a CRP evaluation is to decide which factors will be included and how they will be prioritized. Objective data helps counselors avoid relying solely on their own assessment of "good" and "bad" CRPs, but such data can be difficult to obtain and interpret.

Is speed of service most important, or quality? How is quality measured – by the average wage and hours attained, by the fidelity of the outcome to the Individualized Plan for Employment, or by other measures? How important is the customer service provided to the VR counselor by the CRP (e.g., good communication, reports on time), and how does that compare to consumer outcome measures? How do you compare CRP outcomes in situations where one CRP may be getting more challenging referrals? How useful is any kind of comparative data when there is only one CRP in your community?

Another challenge is determining how the information will be used and shared with consumers. For example, in Nevada, file reviews are done on vendors, but there is little accountability for results, and it falls to the counselor to share and interpret the evaluative information with consumers. Florida is developing a vendor profile that will allow providers to input their own data and indicate their areas of expertise. The profile will include the number of benchmark payments made to the CRP, but no other information from the VR agency. In at least one state, the attorney general advised against using a rating/report card, because VR might be sued and found liable by CRPs if report card grades weren't comparable. The attorney general recommended that VR agencies limit evaluation to a "vendor profile," not a grade or score.

It can be difficult to support consumer choice. Some consumers don't want to choose; they just want to know who can help them, and they look to their counselor to provide that information in the limited amount of face time they have. Consumers may not be able to interpret comparative information provided on available CRPs. Counselors may tell consumers which CRPs have relationships with businesses in the consumer's target area, or they may make recommendations based on which CRPs they have the best relationship with.

In many states, counselors are responsible for individual case service budgets, and may prefer CRPs that get outcomes at the least expense. As noted before, most CRPs have diversified funding streams, with VR as one of many players. Therefore, VR's ability to influence the way CRPs do business may be limited.

It can be difficult to make changes in CRPs that have established contracts, especially in areas where there are limited CRP resources. Some states use a more formal process, informing the CRP that no further referrals will be made, while others just stop making referrals to poorly performing



vendors. Rhode Island removes CRPs from the vendor list if they haven't had a paid authorization in 8 quarters. Pennsylvania also pulls contracts from CRPs that are not providing quality outcomes.

States also differ in their process for developing and onboarding new CRPs. Some do not allow new CRPs to enter saturated markets, suggesting instead that they consider offering services in underserved regions. In New Hampshire, potential CRPs are reviewed by all the workforce partners to see if additional capacity is needed in a given area.

Overall, there was a lot of concern expressed at the forum about the general quality of CRP services provided both to businesses and to VR consumers. CRPs with good professional standards and high-quality outcomes seem to be the exception, and are highly valued by VR agencies.

Challenge 4: VR–CRP payment structures and business engagement

The overwhelming majority of VR agencies nationwide have had longstanding relationships with private (usually nonprofit) CRPs. Until recently, these relationships have centered on in-house activities such as vocational evaluation, work assessments, job search skills workshops, and soft skills tutorials.

Until the advent of supported employment and subsequent changes in the Rehabilitation Act, dating back 30 years, VR-contracted services often included sheltered work, even if only as a precursor to eventual community job placement. More recently, VR agencies partner with CRPs through fee-for-service or other financial arrangements for community employment efforts, including job shadowing, community-based work experiences, transitional or supported employment, or direct job placement.

Some VR agencies still consider job development and business engagement as primarily a VR staff role. Others see the relationship as one where the VR counselor refers and monitors placement activities, but CRP staff conduct the actual client job match and business engagement efforts with financing provided by VR. In practice, with the exception of very few VR agencies that have no CRPs within their states, VR systems use a hybrid model, where placement and business engagement efforts are provided both by in-house staff and contracted CRPs.

Since the milestone payment system piloted by Oklahoma VR in the 1990s, there has been a movement away from fee-for-service basis, based on time spent or type of activity offered (evaluation work assessment, job skills workshops, etc.), and towards payment for outcomes and outputs. These milestone/outcome payment systems often include a mix of payments for outcomes/outputs (e.g., intake, career/placement plan, job placement, 90 days of stability) and hourly fees (e.g., job coaching).

Another variation on these basic models is adding a “bonus” feature to either fee-for-service or milestone systems. With this system, certain targeted achievements or groups of clients make the CRP eligible for either an increased amount for a milestone, or a higher hourly or day rate under fee-for-service (e.g., helping a client obtain a job above a certain wage, or working with a specific type of client such as a Social Security benefits recipient). In addition to all of the above, some agencies contract for a bulk set of outcomes or services under a contract rather than a “pay as you go” system.

Another innovative vehicle is contracting with a CRP for a specific business relations/job placement



staff member who is attached full time to a specific office. While officially an employee of the CRP, this staffer responds to the needs set by the VR office management.

Outcome/output requirements under WIOA have caused VR agencies to reexamine how they achieve business results, whether directly or in conjunction with CRPs. Therefore, agencies have analyzed and further refined these payment structures for greater accountability, client impact, and prudent use of public funding.

There is no “magic bullet” to achieve all three of these goals. For example, some states have found that moving from fee-for-service to benchmarking or milestones did not produce better outcomes at reduced costs, so they have moved back to their original fee-for-service arrangement to reassess.

These changes affecting VR agencies have also had an impact on CRPs. VR agencies usually will not commit a specific amount of annual funding for which a CRP executive director can securely budget. Also, the milestone/outcome approach makes it more difficult for CRPs to predict and budget on VR revenues, compared to an hourly or daily fee for services.

Less directly but just as important, with the greater expectations for VR outcomes and the diminished amount of VR funding available in many states, CRPs that rely on VR funding as their major source of support face significant uncertainty. At the same time, many state MH and DD systems now are expected to focus on community services, including community employment, with a major funding source from Medicaid. Usually, the amounts of money available from Medicaid dwarf the available VR revenues, so CRPs that have broadened their funding base beyond VR find themselves much more beholden fiscally to Medicaid and associated system rules than to VR requirements.

Some ongoing issues and problems include:

- » What is an appropriate mix of funding models that a state VR agency should use with CRPs to maximize results in terms of business engagement?
- » Should an SVRA have one statewide funding model for CRP business engagement, or should it vary by locality within the state (e.g., urban, suburban, rural, frontier) within a broad range of general fiscal parameters?
- » What is an appropriate mix of outcomes and outputs that a VR agency should pay for with CRPs to maximize results in terms of business engagement?
- » How can VR influence CRPs it may rely on when most of the funding for that CRP comes not from VR but from other systems (MH, DD, workforce, welfare) or financing mechanisms?
- » What is the most effective way to coordinate business engagement strategies used directly by VR agencies, and those for which they contract from CRPs?
- » How should VR agencies calculate return on investment for CRPs in regard to business engagement?
- » Often the CRP is the visible instrument of business engagement while using VR funding. How should VR agencies ensure that their investment in CRP business engagement gets recognized in PR materials, positive publicity, and information generated for funders, policy makers, and politicians?



- » What kinds of joint community outreach should a VR agency engage in with a CRP partner for which it provides funding?
- » How can VR agencies use funding to stimulate creativity through CRP efforts in business engagement?
- » Is CRP funding through VR best used to enable CRPs to do general marketing and business outreach, or should CRP funding through VR be used for direct client job placement activities?
- » Can VR develop more models of business engagement that in essence use the businesses themselves as CRPs (e.g., Walgreens, Starbucks)?

Challenge 5: CRPs in remote areas

VR consumers in rural areas across the country face many challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment due to limited access to reliable transportation and limited coverage of CRPs. Though there is no “one size fits all” approach to overcome these obstacles, state VR agencies provide resources to consumers to increase their access to a better variety of jobs, greater independence in using transportation, and more consistent support of quality CRPs.

Due to the lack of public transportation options in remote areas, some state VR agencies have begun to look at Uber as an option for VR consumers to use as a vehicle to get to work and/or an option for employment. [Uber](#) is an on-demand ride-sharing application in which consumers can request a ride and get a response from an available driver within minutes. Uber also employs drivers who operate on a flexible schedule.

Though Uber is a great option, it may be difficult for some VR consumers to use depending on the cost of the ride each day in comparison to their wages. In addition, there may be limited Uber drivers available in more remote areas. In some cases, state VR agency staff have worked with businesses who have secured transportation for an employee, generally due to the personal commitment of a business owner or staff member. For example, [view partnerships between VocRehab Vermont and small businesses](#). These partnerships help VR consumers address multiple barriers to employment in rural areas, including transportation.

Some VR agencies have difficulty recruiting CRPs to serve in remote areas due to the time it takes to travel from one part of the state to another. Most states also have extensive vendor application processes, which can limit the number of qualified CRPs due to accreditation requirements (such as [CARF](#)) or individual certificates (such as the one provided by [ACRE](#)).

Despite these challenges, some VR agencies have created incentives for CRPs to serve consumers in remote areas. Agencies have tried using CRPs in neighboring states, being more flexible about CRP credentialing, and paying higher rates for mileage and/ or services to special populations.

VR agencies in Alaska and West Virginia have contracted with special education teachers and aides to provide job exploration and placement services after school and during the summer. These teachers are often well connected in the community, and are familiar with individuals who are transitioning from school to adult services.



Challenge 6: Strategic and innovative approaches to business engagement

Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act as part of WIOA has challenged VR agencies to change many of the traditional ways of doing business. Traditionally, VR agencies have relied on CRPs to be their primary intermediaries with the business community on a day-to-day basis beyond broad public relations/marketing efforts such as brochures, “For Employers” sections on VR websites, and publicizing October as Disability Awareness Month.

Now, VR agencies are getting engaged in creative and flexible approaches to business engagement while increasing their focus on students and youth with disabilities, competitive and integrated employment outcomes, and engagement with the business community.

CRPs are natural partners in implementing these changes in VR services, because they are already involved in business engagement as part of their job development services. They also may have more flexibility in changing policies or practices more rapidly than public systems. Partnering with established CRPs to do business outreach can soften VR agencies’ image as representatives of a bureaucratic state government system.

For these partnerships to be effective, CRPs have to offer the level of quality services required by VR customers, and must have staff with the competencies and experience needed to provide those services. Additionally, as the purchaser of services on behalf of VR customers, VR agencies must clearly identify the characteristics of quality services/outcomes, and provide oversight to ensure that quality standards are met.

These are areas to consider as VR agencies take a strategic approach to developing, supporting, and overseeing CRP partners:

1. VR agencies can and should create arrangements with CRPs that offer maximum opportunities for flexibility and innovation. But even as authority and funding is delegated, ultimately the VR agency is accountable for client outcomes, responsible use of public funds, and adherence to federal and state regulations.
2. Is it possible to formally involve CRPs in strategically planning the development of new VR business engagement and employer support strategies? At best in most states, CRPs are formally told of changes in policy and procedure once they have been identified. At worst, CRPs learn about changes haphazardly, perhaps by hearing that a local business has received a visit from the new VR business specialist.
3. Is there a good balance between encouraging innovative activities by giving CRP staff flexibility in negotiating with a business, while also maintaining financial and quality oversight of client services? A mutually acceptable partnership could include general agreement on parameters of acceptability, with discretion given to CRP staff to negotiate details.
4. Do funding models encourage CRPs to deliver business services in more effective ways and create incentives for desired outcomes? If CRPs are paid the same regardless of the quality of services and outcomes, it is difficult to expect excellence or even improvement.
5. Would it make sense to look beyond traditional CRP resources and work directly with businesses to arrange work experiences and other activities for job seekers, or to train and contract with non-traditional providers, such as special education teachers and other school personnel, as in West Virginia and Alaska?



6. Are there unintended consequences of current policy/procedure that interfere with services and outcomes? For example, one agency required that any client served by a CRP should have at least 3 job interviews. This requirement was established to ensure that job seekers were not just “dumped” into jobs without any choice or concern about personal preferences. In situations where the job seeker was offered an appropriate position at the first employer interview, he had to then go on two other meaningless job interviews to meet the agency’s requirement.
7. If the VR agency relies on community-based CRPs for the primary levels of business engagement, how is the VR agency visible to the business community as a major resource and source of innovation that stands behind this CRP network? Who is allowed to follow up with a business? For example, if a CRP develops a job for a VR customer at a specific business, is it then reasonable for VR staff to contact the business directly at a later date, or does the contact “belong” to the CRP?
8. How will the agency approach the issue of poor or nonexistent CRP resources in smaller communities and rural areas? Some possibilities include working with existing CRPs to improve staff skills, requiring training/certification for CRP staff (sometimes provided directly by the VR agency), developing new independent contractors, or approaching well-run, existing social service agencies about becoming VR vendors.

Barriers arise when designing innovative ways to partner with CRPs. In most states, CRPs compete with each other for referrals and access to VR financial resources. This makes it difficult to identify CRP representatives to participate in a strategic planning process or a pilot project without ruffling the feathers of those who are not chosen.

A few VR agencies are piloting innovative CRP partnerships with regard to business engagement. Four of these projects are described in the last section of this document, and the Hershey project in Pennsylvania is another great example. Ultimately, although CRPs can be valuable partners in VR business engagement services, it is the VR agency that must maintain responsibility for ensuring that plans are followed and high-quality outcomes are achieved.

Collaborative model examples

The next section provides overviews of initiatives underway in five state VR agencies that are partnering with CRPs to provide business services. Each state has taken a different approach.

- » Missouri established an employment collaborative including VR, CRPs, and business representatives.
- » Florida uses a contracted benchmark system and a team approach to develop the placement plan and ensure a VR presence in the job placement location.
- » Utah is working through the state National Rehabilitation Association chapter to involve VR staff and CRPs as professional partners in trainings and networking events.
- » Minnesota has embedded CRP placement specialists in some offices, and has established a team approach to providing wrap-around services.
- » Alaska is contracting with non-traditional CRPs, including school personnel, in communities where there are no other resources.



MISSOURI VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION BUSINESS COLLABORATION WITH CRPS (NEXUS)



Missouri VR has had a business team for four years. Consisting of 8 representatives and a coordinator, the team has three charges: 1) Outreach and service to businesses, 2) Providing training and resources to VR staff, and 3) Partnering with workforce agencies, centers for independent living, CRPs, etc.

A survey of businesses showed that businesses found VR services confusing, and there was the assumption that VR (and their CRP partners) were just interested in a quick placement rather than really caring about business needs. The employment collaborative was formed to address these concerns.

The Missouri Employment Collaborative (Nexus) consists of VR staff, CRPs, and business representatives, and functions as a central point of contact for businesses. They meet regularly to share job opportunities, and have developed a central marketing strategy. Their first meeting involved four partners including VR, and current meetings involve more than 30 partners. The collaborative also sponsors employer summits and other events.

The collaborative was given a foundation grant in partnership with the Greater Kansas City BLN, with a target of 700 job placements over 3 years. Their data show a steady increase in the number of job seekers employed and in job retention.

Some of the challenges noted in the development of this team are the lack of business knowledge by all partners, concerns about competition between VR and CRP, and difficulty in establishing that representation by one coalition member should result in representation of all coalition members. This project started small and grew quickly. It would have been helpful to have a project management approach and do some strategic planning at the beginning.

Other lessons learned:

Emphasize the shared goal of putting people to work. Keep it simple and focused, not using career pathways and sector strategies language with businesses and other partners, but rather looking within for what they are doing.

Change the marketing strategy from apologetic to emphasizing the pipeline of employees and the services VR can provide. The common marketing strategy was built over time, along with the vision and mission of the business team.

Work towards mutual understanding, with VR picking up the business lingo, etc. but not bending over backwards for the businesses. It's a two-way street, and businesses have to put forth some effort in understanding what VR does. Yes, businesses should drive processes, but businesses might want to consider ways to change their own practices (e.g., simplifying overly complex job descriptions that screen out qualified applicants with disabilities). Businesses often have limited understanding of what people with disabilities can and can't do, so VR has a critical role in training and educating employers.



FLORIDA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION: PARTNERING WITH CRPS TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT BUSINESSES

Florida VR contracts with 209 CRPs statewide to provide business services on behalf of job seekers, paying for services through a contracted benchmark system.

Counselors 1) Make appropriate referrals to providers and select appropriate benchmark payments, 2) Ensure the job obtained matches the job seeker's job goal, and 3) Review monthly progress reports and requests for benchmark payments. Providers 1) Offer services directed at achieving the job goal as requested on the counselor's referral form, 2) Develop employment situations consistent with the job goal, 3) Submit monthly progress reports within 30 days following the month services were delivered, and 4) Submit invoices when benchmarks are achieved.



Employment services assist the job seeker in securing and maintaining integrated, competitive employment. Services vary and must be tailored to the individual's needs. They may include developing employability skills, assisting with job development, providing job leads, helping with the interview process, and occasionally doing job coaching. Some job seekers are provided with 20 hours of classroom training on resume writing, interviewing skills, searching for and applying for jobs online, finding and completing job applications, managing employer initial contacts, handling conflicts, navigating public transportation, and review of benefits.

The system works better in some areas than in others. Attempts to coordinate business services and establish a single point of contact model through internal processes and training have met with mixed success. Established culture and relationships are not always easy to change. In the best situations, VR and CRP staff both participate in a thorough referral meeting (along with the job seeker) that results in agreement on services and goals. Some counselors also visit the place of employment once a placement is made and meet the supervisor and others in the workplace, so that VR's role in the job placement is visible to all.

It has been challenging to motivate staff, and to develop reasonable measures of performance accountability and success. While success is ultimately defined through outcomes for consumers, it is also important to capture services for businesses. In particular, they are focusing on tracking businesses involved in targeted industries, such as IT, hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing.



UTAH STATE OFFICE OF REHABILITATION JOB PLACEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

In Utah, the VR agency (Utah State Office of Rehabilitation, or USOR) partners with the Utah chapter of the National Rehabilitation Association's Job Placement and Development (NRAJPD) program to train and support CRPs serving VR customers. The mission of the NRAJPD is 1) To advance employment for all persons with disabilities through the identification and dissemination of information; 2) To enhance the skills of job placement professionals and vocational rehabilitation counselors; 3) To promote the improvement of career and job placement opportunities for persons with disabilities; and 4) To cooperate with other organizations and professions who share the goal of maximizing the potential of persons with disabilities.



At the state level, the NRAJPD provides a forum to facilitate communication and training opportunities. The program also supports networking consistency, and continuity of services among job placement providers throughout the state. The state DD agency is also involved so that expectations for CRPs are consistent. CRPs contracting with USOR complete mandatory training based on the ACRE competencies (Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators; see <http://www.acreducators.org/competencies>). This training can be obtained from Utah State University or other providers.

Providers and VR staff both pay a fee to join the NRAJPD and to participate in bi-monthly meetings and training events. Besides the training, benefits of membership include information about best practices, sharing of job postings, communication about business partners, reduced registration fees at state conferences, and an opportunity to earn CEUs by participating in meetings.

The USOR VISION system (a statewide video conferencing system) is used for meetings and training events statewide. USOR also provides space for face-to-face meetings, assists with CEU approval, commits staff time for coordination and board participation, and pays conference registration fees for staff. CRPs may pay dues for staff (with an option of agency membership of up to 5 people), and are asked to commit staff time to participate on the board and attend meetings.

The model has increased collaboration and partnership between VR and the CRP community. It provides a dedicated place to make sure accurate information is being shared, stopping the rumor mill. It has also supported a better relationship with business partners. On the down side, the requirement of membership dues can be a deterrent. It has taken time to develop a strong board, and initial board members had to take on the bulk of start-up activities.

To successfully duplicate this partnership, it's important to have a solid commitment from both VR and CRPs to start, and to have a solid training plan developed for the first year so people can see what they're getting into. As always, both VR and CRPs will want to clearly understand what the potential return on investment is for their involvement.



MINNESOTA VR/CRP/CIL BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

Traditionally, Minnesota CRPs have been used to set up assessments, job tryouts, on-the-job training, internships, and placements. Now with WIOA, there is more emphasis on working with businesses to develop customized positions and work experiences for transition-age youth.



MN VR has several initiatives to strengthen the CRP–VR partnership, including contracted CRP placement coordinators embedded in the VR team in four locations. In these offices, a request for proposals was made available for any CRP that wanted to participate. The CRP pays the placement coordinator using contracted funds, while VR provides the office space and equipment. In the other offices, VR program specialists take this role.

VR staffers prepare applicants to meet the needs of the local labor market. They also invite CRPs into employment planning meetings, and coordinate placement services. VR staff members also provide training on “Placement 101” and “On-the-Job Work Training Options,” facilitate placement partnerships, and engage businesses through internal placement specialist positions.

In the offices that include embedded CRP placement coordinators, their role includes facilitating local placement meetings to plan events such as job fairs and business tours, as well as to share job leads, training, and case consultation. A policy committee puts together trainings for policies and implementation, and also hosts trainings for CRPs. Trainings are not mandatory, but CRPs are willing to participate, and most CRP directors require their staff to attend.

Currently, MN VR has Priority Category 1 (at least 3 out of 7 functional limitations) actively being served. Common placement serves all individuals with disabilities with the exception of vision loss, which qualifies for services from the State Services for the Blind. Wrap-around services are provided through coordination with independent living centers, as well as VR and CRPs. This provides a stable foundation for meeting the needs of the whole person, not just focusing on employment. If any area of a person’s life becomes unstable, it can have ramifications for employment planning as well as maintaining a successful job.

VR staff can sometimes be adversarial to CRP involvement. It is important to ask VR staff to be open about how CRPs are doing (positives and negatives). Quarterly meetings have also helped with feedback flow.

What’s working?

- » Supported wrap-around services with counselor involvement throughout process
- » Benefits counseling/financial specialist up front
- » CRPs getting better training and support
- » Lots of support and consistency from leadership
- » “Connect 700” – priority access to state jobs with 700 hours of experience before the official probation period starts
- » Increased collaboration with county partners that provide long-term funding for supported



- employment and are critical to the employment planning process
- » Job leads shared within VR community, resulting in strong business relationships and increased employment outcomes for VR consumers
- » Meeting people where they're at rather than waiting for "readiness"
- » Invitations to meet the job applicant and team, rather than a referral and handoff
- » Increased team communication: written updates twice a month and frequent face-to-face contact
- » Placement is placement, whether it is done by VR staff or Community Partner placement. Focus is on how to best deliver consistent quality placement and retention services statewide.

ALASKA DVR AND NON-TRADITIONAL CRPS

Many Alaska communities have no CRP resources available, or any other social services for that matter. They are small and remote, often reachable only by plane, boat, or snowmobile, and may have only one or two VR participants or students with disabilities. To provide services to these individuals, the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (AK DVR) contracts with non-traditional providers such as local business owners and school personnel.

Non-school-based providers are required to complete training based on the competencies identified by ACRE. This training is offered by the University of Alaska in a distance format, as well as by other training entities outside of Alaska. School personnel are offered training on providing pre-employment transition services (ETS), job development, and job placement in conjunction with the annual statewide special education conference. Both trainings provide information on how to get referrals and contract with AK DVR.

As part of pre-ETS, AK DVR recruited teachers to provide a "JOBZ Club" based on the widely available "Soft Skills to Pay the Bills"³ curriculum. VR paid teachers \$1500 to work with at least five potentially eligible students after school. Eight teachers and 90 kids were involved in the first year (not all kids with disabilities), and 12 new teachers are starting this year. These activities have helped develop relationships with educators, some of whom are also contracting to provide job development and placement in their local community.

In October 2014, AK DVR invited CRPs to apply to provide pre-ETS along with wrap-around services. Projects were awarded to 9 CRPs (6 new). Each program was authorized to serve 25 students for a total of \$75,000 to cover one FTE and an additional \$25,000 for Mental Health Trust funding to jump-start a program. Programs served 150 students during the first year. Barriers encountered included high CRP staff turnover, which resulted in DVR spending a lot of time orienting new CRP staff on project design.

3 <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>



www.exploreVR.org
www.communityinclusion.org

