Abstract

The Oregon Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (OVRS) has adopted the "Enhancing Employment Outcomes" (EEO) model of services. The EEO project trains staff to recognize and target services based on level of customer preparation for employment, and to provide enhanced job-development services. Customer preparation is based on the concept of motivational interviewing. This is a counseling approach designed to enhance motivation by assisting customers in examining and resolving their ambivalence about employment.

The enhanced job development services involved customized job development approaches with employers to find better job matches for customers. This project began as a result of a self-assessment that indicated that the agency could improve services to people with the most significant disabilities (MSD). Additional projects and policy changes are also linked to the EEO project, including systematic counselor training with supporting materials and tools on customer preparation and job development, a motivational intervention (MI) support team, and changes in how the agency purchases job-development services. It was a comprehensive effort that also engaged community rehabilitation providers and employers. This project represents a successful effort in improving outcomes of VR customers with MSD.

Background

In 2005, after a change in leadership, the OVRS underwent an external evaluation to identify strategies to improve employment outcomes. This evaluation identified a need to improve services to individuals with the most significant disabilities (MSD), and the evaluators recommended training and other strategies to increase engagement of customers. Recommendations included increasing the focus on customer preparation (e.g., reliability, dependability, and the motivation to work) versus work skills when customers first apply for services, as well as training counselors to provide customized job development and placement services to customers.[1]

As a result of the evaluation, the OVRS decided to increase the number of customers, particularly those with MSD, who closed with an employment outcome by implementing MI techniques. The agency also used job-development training materials and tools purchased through Dover Training Group-Employment Management Professionals (DTG-EMP). DTG-EMP is a Canadian training and consulting company that specializes in assisting workforce-development organizations (including state VR agencies) to improve the employment outcomes of their customers.[2]

In January 2009, the OVRS implemented an Order of Selection (OOS) policy because it lacked the resources to serve all eligible customers. The last time that the OVRS had an OOS was in 1997. Since then, the agency had continued using the priority category system (three categories), despite not being in an OOS for over a decade. In the 2009 OOS policy, the OVRS added a fourth category to further separate out customers by level of significant disability, making the groups of individuals in categories 3 and 4 smaller. It was anticipated that the agency would be able to open up all categories and, once again, be able to serve the individuals in these categories.

The OOS priority categories include:[3]

- Category 1: (Individuals with the Most Significant Disabilities; MSD1) Individuals have at least three serious functional capability limitations (e.g., mobility, communication, self-care, self-direction, interpersonal skills, work tolerance, or work skills)

1. Oregon Rehabilitation Services Organizational Assessment. Employment Management Professionals (August 4, 2005). Copy obtained from key informant.

2. Oregon Rehabilitation Services Organizational Assessment. Employment Management Professionals (August 4, 2005). Copy obtained from key informant.

3. Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services [OVRS] (2009). Oregon Order of Selection Brochure. Copy obtained from key informant.

and require at least two VR services over an extended period of time.

- Category 2: (Individuals with the Most Significant Disabilities; MSD2) Individuals have two serious functional capacity limitations and require at least two VR services over an extended period of time.
- Category 3: (Individuals with Significant Disabilities; SD) Individuals have one serious functional capacity limitation and require at least two VR services over an extended period of time. (Social Security beneficiaries are also category 3, but may be classified as category 1 or 2 if they meet the criteria.)
- Category 4: (All other eligible individuals) Those who do not meet the criteria for priority categories 1, 2, or 3.

The agency created and implemented a large-scale, statewide training on the OOS policy targeted at counselors. New training materials were developed, including a new manual, and a training team made up of two branch managers, a training coordinator, and another staff person who traveled the state to deliver the mandatory training to all staff. According to our key informant, in-person trainings were held in different locations across the state to make sure that all staff were appropriately trained on the OOS policy. The OVRS ensures consistent application of the priority category assignment through case reviews, as well as the requirement built into the electronic case-management system that cases must be categorized before the eligibility determination is accepted.

Purpose, Goals, and Implementation

One purpose of the practice was to use MI techniques as a way to assess customer readiness and select the best approach to plan appropriate vocational services or to help the person decide if he or she was interested in pursuing work at this time. The second purpose was to prepare staff to align job preparedness of customers with customized job-development approaches based on customer ability and job preparation. The goal of the practice was to improve employment outcomes, particularly for customers with MSD, while reducing the number of unsuccessful closures and service dollars spent on customers who were not ready for employment. The overarching goals of the practices were to increase successful employment rates, increase customer and employer satisfaction with hired customers, increase efficiency/effectiveness of available agency resources, and increase staff satisfaction and morale due to higher rates of success.[4]

This project began as a pilot using MI techniques and job-development training, materials, and tools purchased through DTG-EMP. As a result of the notable improvements in employment outcomes and reduction of unsuccessful closures associated with the pilot project, the agency expanded the project statewide. The project led to additional changes in agency policy and resource management, including an MI support team, changes in how the agency purchases job development services, a core employment team, and additional projects.

a. Counselor training on customer preparation

The OVRS purchased training and supporting materials and tools on MI and job development from DTG-EMP and implemented the training over a five-month period, averaging three to five in-person training days per month. The OVRS customized the training to better match the needs of the counselors based on both local circumstances and agency culture. Staff were trained using a dual approach focused on developing customers' motivation and readiness for work (referred to as "Motivated, Reliable, Dependable") and effective strategies for job development and labor-market penetration. The latter refers to job development strategies that focus on sales and marketing.

The initial training was provided by DTG-EMP and included three-day group workshops on motivation, tools, and techniques; individual office visits; group role plays; individual skill-based coaching; and taping staff and providing feedback based on demonstrated skills. Over a two-year period (2007-2009) the MI strategies were integrated into practice and the agency had developed a seven-step process for assessing customer stage of change (see Table 1) and responding appropriately within the context of the VR process.[5]

Additional support was also provided by OVRS staff on a peer-to-peer basis through mentoring and feedback on taped counseling practice sessions. Once counselors had completed the training they had the opportunity to mentor other staff who were newly learning the techniques. The mentoring is ongoing, and the agency now manages motivational approach training and staff development internally.

To assess motivation, counselors were trained to apply the Stages of Change model based on the work of Prochaska and DiClemente (1982). The stages are defined in the Table below.

To develop candidates who are motivated, reliable, and dependable, counselors were trained to assess customers for

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4   Dover Training Group-Employment Management Professionals [DTG-EMP] (n.d.). Enhancing Employment Outcomes Overview-Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Toronto, CA: DTG-EMP.

5   Kennedy, K. (2010). Fall 2010 MI Field Survey Results. Portland, OR: OVRS.

motivation after determining eligibility. Using the Stages of Change model and using MI tools to work with a customer "where they are at" on the stage of change, counselors place customers into job-ready status when they are in the "preparation" stage with regard to work. Then they use one of four categories or "profiles" according to the job placement strategy that would be most effective given their readiness to work and their ability to access a job given their particular employment barriers. The four employment-barrier profiles include:[6]

- Self-placement: Can get a job independently (motivated and skilled). Barrier is that individual does not know how to market self to employers.
- Job development 1: Should be able to get a job independently (motivated and skilled), but cannot. Barrier is that employers have negative perception due to external characteristics (such as disability, age, race/ethnicity, criminal history) that represent a person that the employer does not usually hire.
- Job development 2: Wants to get a job, but can't (motivated, but limited skills). Barrier is that the individual lacks skills, and also employers have a negative perception due to external characteristics (such as disability, age, race/ethnicity, criminal history) that represent a person that the employer does not usually hire.
- Motivational development: Won't work or cannot hold a job (maybe lacks skills and/or low motivation). Barrier is the person's lack of motivation to work, regardless of level of skill.

b. Counselor training on job development and employer focus

Job development and labor-market penetration was the other portion of the pilot training project. Counselors were trained in job-development approaches, stressing employer needs and developing a match between the job seeker and employer that is mutually beneficial. Additionally, counselors continued to support job seekers in selling themselves and their skills to employers, and to help job seekers be perceived positively by employers. This training activity also focused on how to effectively represent job seekers who require extra assistance finding employment due to a lack of skills or a need to manage employer perceptions of the person's viability.

Counselors also learned approach tactics, such as how to

do research on employers, make appointments to speak with an employer, set up assessments to identify employer needs, handle employer objections, sell a candidate (or get the employer to hire someone), and use follow-up strategies. According to our key informant, counselors were asked to develop long-term relationships with employers that might benefit customers in the long run, while also conducting targeted outreach to employers on behalf of job seekers. This training was initially provided by DTG-EMP, but has been taken over by an OVRS staff person who now also oversees this training for contracted vendors of job-development services.

c. Scope and initiation of the pilot project

For the initial pilot, the OVRS asked counselors to volunteer to participate in the training and apply the MI techniques and job-development approaches with their customers. Participating counselors did not receive any incentives for participation and maintained their usual caseloads in addition to attending trainings. The OVRS also required that the managers of the volunteer counselors attend the training. Forty counselors participated in the pilot, including 20 counselors from the northern part of the state and 20 counselors from the southern part. Our key informant explained:

> They [counselors] just were very willing to do it. It was pretty amazing. Now, some of them were managers, at the beginning there were managers and branch staff...If a staff person chose to participate their manager had to participate along side of them so they would understand what they were being asked to do.

Over the five-month training period, the OVRS monitored the number of placements achieved by these participants and saw an increase of about 113 placements.

d. Statewide expansion of the pilot project and the MI support team

The pilot project was successful in increasing employment outcomes, decreasing unsuccessful closures, and reducing the number of service dollars spent on unsuccessful closures. Because of this, OVRS leadership decided to expand the EEO project and implement it statewide. Staff traveled to each OVRS office and described the project in detail to all staff, including how EEO would impact each staff person's roles and responsibilities.

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[6]   Enhancing Employment Outcomes Project presentation (2008, August). Copy obtained from key informant.

Two OVRS staff were responsible for working alongside DTG-EMP consultants providing consistent training for two years. This ensured that all OVRS staff were trained in MI, job development, and integrating the assessment strategies and counseling interventions with all OVRS customers. Fifteen of the counselors who participated in the initial pilot project served as mentors and were dispersed throughout the state, although there was not a mentor in each field office. The mentors help other counselors learn MI vocational counseling and other techniques targeted at assessing and increasing motivation.

In the first two years since introducing the approach to vocational counseling (2007–2009), it became embedded into the VR process. Over this time, the process was simplified into seven steps:[7]

1) Counselor consistently assesses customer's stage of change.

2) Counselor completes the customer pre-plan or post-plan assessment (e.g., worksheet) to confirm stage of change.

3) Counselor works with customers in pre-contemplation to create problem awareness.

4) Counselor refers customers in pre-contemplation to the "Contemplating Change" workshops

5) Counselor consistently completes the decision balance process with customers in contemplation, and explores concerns and removal of obstacles.

6) Counselor considers obstacles in the development of the customer's Individual Plan for Employment (IPE).

7) Counselor consistently confirms customer is in the "preparation" stage before placing them into a plan.

An addition to the agency's motivational approach has been the development of "Contemplating Change" workshops. This is a service that can be provided to customers who are in the pre-contemplation stage. By January 2010, there were a total of 25 staff trained by DTG-EMP's subcontractor as facilitators for these workshops, and counselors can refer customers to them if needed.

To help reinforce application of MI techniques by counselors, the OVRS formed a MI support team in 2010. The team consists of three counselors who are responsible for supporting staff in using the MI techniques, while also providing MI supports to customers. At the end of the third year of the MI approach (in 2010), the team traveled to

offices to present counselors with self-assessments of their MI counseling skills and self-rated efficacy, as well as to help identify which skills the counselors found most important. This was done to determine what additional training, materials, and tools would be needed for counselors to be more confident and skillful in using these techniques. They also discussed the MET workshops with counselors due to underutilization, including strategies to increase referrals to these workshops in the overall effort to increase the use of MI counseling.

Results indicated that offices varied in their adoption of the MI approach, and there was a direct relationship between how well counselors within the branch reported that they understood the techniques and the skills involved and whether they wanted training. The agency used this information to identify which offices were likely resistant to the initiative, where counselors need more targeted skill development to use the approach more often, and where counselors use the approach often. The MI support team, administrative staff, and field managers have used the data gathered from the survey to develop next steps in training, administrative messages, and supervision to increase the use of the MI approach throughout the agency.

Key informants said that despite the fact that learning the MI approach was difficult, the efforts of the MI support team and the mentors helped to get more counselors on board with the initiative. The peer-to-peer nature of these efforts was particularly helpful, because the individuals who were promoting the MI approach were also counselors, so they understood the challenges that are faced on a daily basis in the field. As explained by a key informant, "When we went out to the field, we spent time with them, practiced with them, and I think that that one-on-one communication, listening, working together, sharing stories, I think that would be another turning point." These strategies were helpful in getting counselors who were unsure about or not willing to try the motivational approach to at least consider it, and in some cases start using it.

As for the job development aspect of the pilot and statewide expansion, key informants reported similar impressions. Some counselors began to integrate the employer contact aspects of the practice immediately, while others were not as comfortable or did not feel as prepared to do so. Managers in different regions managed staffing assignments based on interest and skill level in the job-development strategies as well as need. For example, a key informant explained that in some branches particular staff have "thrived in this role." As a result, managers have reduced the counselors' caseload

7   Kennedy, K. (2010). Fall 2010 MI Field Survey Results. Portland, OR: OVRS.

and allowed them to do more work directly with employers on behalf of all of the counselors within the branch. Other counselors have not felt comfortable taking these responsibilities on, so they continue to rely on the contracted vendors as their primary source of job-development services. However, a result of the expansion of the job-development training to all counselors has been the increased understanding of good job-development principles, making staff more informed purchasers of these services.

e. Job development contracts and the employment team

Following the pilot program, the OVRS consulted participating counselors to gather feedback on the relationship between the OVRS and employers, including the purchasing of job-development services and development of a centrally located employment team. The employment team was created to support the project and included a project manager, job-development coordinator, and employer liaison. Through this process, the OVRS started to "unpeel the layers" of its system for purchasing job-development services from their vendors and concluded that this system needed to be changed.[8]

In 2010, the agency moved from a typical fee-for-service model (e.g., payment for job development hours) to an outcome-based payment model. Our key informants explained that they were being billed for some service hours that were not strictly related to job development, such as other "get to know the customer" activities (e.g., going out for coffee). The agency wanted to set up a system that reinforced active engagement with employers and efficiency of finding jobs.

Several key informants noted that the contract changes were difficult for the job-developer vendors. The agency received some pushback, as many of the vendors were small businesses and relied on the hourly payments to meet their operating costs. Also, under a strictly milestone-oriented system, vendors were concerned that they would not be compensated for time they needed to get to know the customers and would have to pay for staffing time for those activities themselves. The change came at the same time that the developmental services agency was also proposing changes to its rate structure.

The OVRS set up a 15-month transition period from the old payment system to the new outcome-based system, with new contractual agreements between the agency and vendors.

During this time, the payment structure was a balance between fee-for-service (e.g., job coaching) and milestone payments (e.g., a customer placed in a job). The OVRS also began offering their job development curriculum to their contracted job developers along with VR staff, as well as in specialized trainings just for vendors.

Approximately 60 of the 244 job developer vendors took part in these early trainings that laid the groundwork for the new system, and about half of the existing 244 vendors continued with the agency under new contracts.[9] To go along with the new contractual agreement between the OVRS and vendors, the agency formed a job developers' advisory group in January 2011 to get feedback on its business relationship with the vendors and recruited additional contracted job-developer vendors. In order to communicate the changes in contracts to the vendors, the agency held webinars and trainings and sent written communications so that vendors could educate themselves on the new system of being paid for serving OVRS customers. The changeover to the milestone-based system is ongoing, and the agency is still addressing financial and procedural concerns of the job-development vendors.

The employment team uses two strategies with employers: to build relationships with large companies, and to ensure that the agency has an effective sales force through a group of readily available and highly trained contracted job developers. One part of the team primarily engages with large-scale employers, providing services such as Americans with Disabilities Act training and disability etiquette, with the goal of positioning the OVRS as a source of good employees. The other part of the team manages and trains direct-service job developers with the Employment Outcomes Professional Curriculum, which is an effort managed by a staff person from the central office, called the Job Developer Coordinator. This position was created in 2008, and was modified from an existing position of Community Rehabilitation Program Coordinator. The agency modified the job description to make this person exclusively responsible for coordination of vendors who provide job placement assistance.

The Job Developer Coordinator uses purchased materials and tools to train job developers on customer preparation and employer-focused job-development techniques. The coordinator also covers how to do business with the OVRS (e.g., vendor/payment processes) and oversees job-development efforts. In addition to other roles, this person identifies customers who have been in job-placement status for too long, and provides technical assistance and advice to

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[8]   Information obtained from key informant.

[9]   Information obtained from key informant.

the counselor and job developer working with that individual.

Additionally, the Job Developer Coordinator has knowledge of the counselors and job developers across the state, and can serve as a resource and way to connect counselors and job developers to assist with challenging customer circumstances. The coordinator, as mentioned, trains the contracted job developers with the Employment Outcomes Professional Curriculum, a three-day workshop that is required for staff of vendors. The model for this training includes the following four main steps for job development:[10]

1. Prospecting: Identifying potential employers, making contacts, and scheduling appointments with employers.

2. Needs Analysis: Discussing business needs with potential employers, forestalling potential employer objections about the ability of OVRS customers to meet requirements.

3. Selling: Presenting potential employees (OVRS customers) based on identified business needs and customer match, resolving employer concerns regarding the ability of OVRS customers to meet requirements, and confirming agreements about next steps in the working relationship.

4. Follow-up: Meeting with employers to evaluate success of placement, identifying ways to improve effectiveness of placement, and identifying additional opportunities from that employer or referrals to other employers.

Communications between vendors and counselors regarding the progress of referred customers are based on this model, as is payment for services.

In addition, the OVRS has developed a vendor evaluation system, which uses data from the state case management system and generates a "report card" for each of the contracted vendors. The agency created a definition for a "quality job" based on living wage within the county of residence, healthcare benefits, and opportunity for promotion. The agency tracks data from placements and successful closures by customer type (e.g., supported employment case, individual with a developmental disability). Then it rates job developers based on their performance to determine what vendors produce the most value for the case money spent on their services. This "value" is a factor of the number of placements, quality of jobs, and severity of work barriers of the customers.

Results

According to data collected by the OVRS, the 40-counselor pilot resulted in an additional 113 job placements, reducing the number of unsuccessful closures by 60 in one year (1,490 unsuccessful closures in FY2006–2007, compared to 1,550 in FY2005–2006).[11] This translates into approximately $184,500[12] of service-dollar savings. In FY2010, the number of successful closures continued to increase to 1,570.[13] Of the customers who closed successfully, only 21 did not meet the criteria of having a "significant disability."

As for contracted job developers, the OVRS has seen a decrease in cost for job-developer expenditures compared with performance in 2008–2010, although at the same time they have seen a decrease in the number of vendors that contract with the agency.[14] In 2010, the agency spent approximately 1 million dollars less than it did in 2008, with the percentage of customers referred to job developers who were closed with an employment outcome increasing from 24% in 2008 to 48% in 2010. The agency lost approximately 20% of its vendors from 2008 to 2009.

As for other benefits, a key informant explained that the trainings and shift to the milestone payments has helped the job developers to focus more on employers' needs, often creating better opportunities for OVRS customers. For example, by following the job development model, a job developer approached an employer and ascertained a business need, and as a result proposed a carved job for a customer. This resulted in an individual with MSD being hired for a job that fills a real employer need that typically the individual would not have had access to. Other examples of benefits to customers have been opportunities for job tryouts that have resulted from more direct approaches to employers.

The results of the MI techniques are less obvious based on agency numbers. While the OVRS was operating an OOS policy with a waitlist for services (from January 2009 until

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10   Oregon Department of Human Services (2009). Job development staff reference guide. Salem, OR: Oregon Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Copy obtained from key informant.

11   Oregon Department of Human Services (n.d.). Oregon Department of Human Services Policy Option Package - Budget Request. Salem, OR: Oregon Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Retrieved from http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/vr/oos/understand-oos.pdf

12   Oregon Department of Human Services (n.d.). Oregon Department of Human Services Policy Option Package - Budget Request. Salem, OR: Oregon Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Retrieved http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/vr/oos/understand-oos.pdf

13   Information obtained from key informant.

14   Information obtained from key informant.

September 2010), the motivational techniques were helpful in keeping counselors engaged and more effectively working with those who were receiving services. The greatest benefit was that counselors had a way to ensure that customers were making progress towards employment and an intervention to implement if a customer was stuck. A key informant explained:

> …there were lengths of time [customers] were in that status without showing any movement forward, and we really had an opportunity during those six months to look at that group of folks and work MI with them. And that, in fact, did show us that some folks—if you worked motivationally with them—they would move forward and they would leave because they would go to work. They would go off their caseloads by getting jobs.

According to our key informants, one of the most helpful aspects of the motivational approach is that it gives counselors tools to work with each customer, wherever they are in the change process. If a customer comes in and presents with behavior that may be considered uncooperative, angry, or lazy, rather than seeing that individual as unmotivated and difficult, the counselor has the tools to recognize the stage the customer is in and to help move that person to the next stage. For some individuals, this may mean that the counselor looks for motivation to change approaches to medical management or substance abuse treatment. As described by a key informant, staff now "work for the surprise, because you never know when underneath […] what you can get when somebody is truly motivated to go to work."

A key informant explained that although this approach represents a useful counseling skill and that for many counselors the initial response was very positive, it represents a major shift from how counselors previously approached their work with customers. One example of how the motivational approach is different is how often counselors see customers. In a more traditional VR model, counselors see customers at regular intervals for check-ins and updates, but with the motivational approach, depending on the stage of change the customer is in, a counselor may see him or her several times in a week. The focus shifts to applying clinical skills to determine readiness for change and what the role of the counselor is at this point. For some, this change has been difficult, and it has taken consistent effort and support to get

some staff on board with using this technique:

> The hardest part was really changing everything about the way I did my work, letting go of my ego and saying "Hey, I'm a beginner, and I'm going to be a beginner for a long time." So, I think throughout the last three years being involved with it, I've seen many counselors go through the same stage of change.

Key informants stressed that the MI approach is particularly important as the agency continues to serve individuals with MSD. As one informant explained, "I think that as we are dealing with [individuals with] these more severe and complex disabilities, there are the styles of working that we need to have in order to be successful... It's about working with them where they are and helping them get to a point where they are moving forward or have them get to a point where they are moving away." This comment illustrates how counseling tools such as MI can assist VR customers in determining their level of interest and readiness for work, and make an empowered choice as to what is the next step for them.

Now that counselors are prepared to identify stage of change in customers, they can readily listen for "change talk." that is, comments made by the customer that indicate his or her stage of change. As explained by a key informant, when the motivational approach is applied, and counselors spend a little more time working with stage of change, the end result is often better in the long term. At this point, the agency continues to focus on use of the MI approach, and aims to increase the adoption of these strategies by all counseling staff through continued communication from leadership, targeted training, and supportive supervision.

When asked to reflect on the project as a whole, key informants responded with a few overarching themes. They said that the project has been beneficial to both staff and customers of the agency, although not all of the results can be demonstrated with hard numbers. There was acknowledgement that the success of the project required substantial investment in a few areas, most notably funding for training and staff time and effort. The trainings that were provided to staff on MI and the job-development model were extensive, and the materials were purchased. After the externally provided trainings were completed, OVRS staff took over the management of the content and delivery of the trainings. Additional staff effort was needed to help support counselors in learning the skills, including mentoring,

observation, and clinical supervision.

Similar effort was required for the job-development trainings, in terms of keeping them going and modifying them for the vendors. Over time, new staff have needed to be trained and existing staff provided with resources to keep their skills current. From a leadership standpoint, a consistent message that this project is a priority has been helpful in maintaining momentum and in achieving success.

Key informants commented that the presentation of trainings to staff has to be done thoughtfully, including the order of skills presented (e.g., motivation before job development) as well as the time that is allowed for learning (e.g., the time between segments, how much material is presented at once). Another theme was communication, including how you introduce changes to staff internally and externally to contracted vendors and community partners. Early communication and clear and consistent messages, as well as incorporating feedback, are important when introducing changes, particularly those that might create challenges. The agency continues to focus on keeping these strategies in the forefront of how OVRS provides services.

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