Underutilization of One-Stops by People with Significant Disabilities

INTRODUCTION

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) identifies individuals with disabilities as among the constituencies to be served by One-Stop Career Centers. Due to a variety of factors, including lack of an overall One-Stop data collection system, no clear way to identify disability in the system, and non–disclosure of disability by many customers, it is difficult to ascertain the exact level of One-Stop usage by people with disabilities. However, existing data sources and anecdotal evidence indicate that people with disabilities underutilize One-Stops. The number of people with disabilities that use One-Stops seems to be lower than what would be expected based on the percentage of people with disabilities in the adult population. The disproportionately high rate of un- and underemployment among people with disabilities makes their underutilization of this career resource a critical issue.

Increasing the use of One-Stops by job seekers with disabilities can be a challenge. Underutilization may be due to a lack of appropriate services for individuals with more significant disabilities, who may find visiting a One-Stop an overwhelming experience. At the same time, the philosophy of "universal access" should ensure that any customer can utilize core services of the One-Stop. People with disabilities should not have to bypass core services and rely exclusively on disability programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). The key is making these generic services welcoming, accommodating, and tailored to everyone.

Many One-Stops have created successful strategies to increase access for customers with significant disabilities. The following is offered as a tool for One-Stops to use in their efforts to promote increased access and meaningful outcomes for job seekers. It is our hope that these examples will stimulate the development of exemplary employment services for individuals with disabilities in One-Stops across the country.

This brief is part of a series of products offering practical solutions for state and local entities as they implement the Workforce Investment Act. Topics covered in other briefs include fiscal issues, models of involvement for community-based disability organizations, addressing staff knowledge and concerns, and involvement of state VR agencies with other One-Stop partners. The source of the information presented below is case studies conducted in Los Angeles, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Wilmington, Delaware; New Orleans, Louisiana; Utica, New York; and Clark County, Washington. These case studies were conducted by researchers at the Institute for Community Inclusion/University of Massachusetts Boston.

ISSUES RELATED TO SUPPORTING JOB SEEKERS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

Services geared towards the independent job seeker

Respondents explained that services in the One-Stops were primarily self-directed, meaning job seekers had to be comfortable showing initiative in uncovering resources. While beneficial for the well-seasoned job seeker, self-directed services are not always appropriate for those with limited experience using a complex service system. Many services offered in resource rooms are computer-based, which may be challenging for individuals who have not used computers or who have a limited ability to follow written instructions. When individuals were unclear about the type of help they needed or required more intensive support, the experience could be frustrating. Staff members were concerned that those who needed the most support might be unable to access services due to limitations on staff time or lack of expertise in supporting people with specific needs.

Perceived disincentives created by performance measures

Individuals with significant disabilities and other barriers to employment often require more extensive time and support to obtain a job. Performance measures are intended to look at the One-Stop's activities across all customers and should not be used as a consideration in deciding whether a single individual should receive those services. Staff occasionally reported hesitation to register or refer individuals because they were concerned that outcomes might not meet performance measures.

Limited staff training

Staff reported the need for training to better serve customers with non-apparent or more significant disabilities. While assisting someone with a physical disability was reportedly less challenging, staff had greater difficulty when a disability was not easily identifiable and the individual required more assistance. Staff often felt unclear about how to proceed or how to suggest other resources that might be appropriate.

Assistive technology: The catch-22

Most sites reported having a variety of assistive technology devices. Although sophisticated (and expensive) technology had been purchased, staff reported very little demand. As a result, staff had limited practice with the technology and were not comfortable

with their ability to assist someone in using it. Since they did not use the technology on an ongoing basis, their skills declined. Staff in Los Angeles described the situation as a catch-22: customers did not come in to use the equipment because staff could not provide support, and staff were not familiar with the equipment because people did not come in to use it.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING THE USE OF ONE-STOPS BY JOB SEEKERS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

Create a clear path to services

One-Stops need to provide a clear path to staff-assisted core or intensive services so that customers can feel comfortable asking for help. This requires strong communication and assessment and a welcoming social environment that is physically accessible. Techniques include such basics as clear signage and clearly written materials that outline services and how to access them, with the information verbally reinforced by staff during orientation and other customer interactions. All partners can work together to incorporate an assessment of individual customer needs during the initial orientation to One-Stop services. Staff need to recognize the level of support an individual requires and adapt service options accordingly. This allows customers to feel safe advocating for their needs related to learning style, accessibility, mental health concerns, or other issues. Staff should give clear messages that customers are entitled to accommodations and specific information on how to access them.

Build supports into core services

Disability coordinators

Los Angeles, California and Clark County, Washington used the strategy of designating one staff person to have more expertise and time to support people with disabilities. This individual typically supplemented the roles and responsibilities of frontline staff. In Los Angeles, the coordinator was considered the "go-to" person to assist staff with disability-related questions. The disability coordinator not only conducted the initial assessment with the customer but also helped the job seeker select and access resources. Disability coordinators had superior networking resources in the community and advocated on customers' behalf. In Clark County, if additional assistance was required, the individual was offered help from VR staff, although this was not considered a mandatory outcome.

Consumer navigators

In Colorado Springs, the One-Stop hired consumer navigators to help job seekers with disabilities use the system. Navigators worked directly with individuals to ensure they had access to the required services and learned how to "navigate" systems. They also provided resource information and troubleshooting, and conducted outreach to underserved groups. Although consumer navigators linked the customers to resources, they were not considered direct service providers. They did not provide employment services, nor were they evaluators, counselors, or case managers. Rather, the consumer navigator linked the job seeker with a service provider, often one of the partner agencies in the One-Stop, that could provide the appropriate supports, training, and information. Through a joint agreement between the Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of Labor, funding is being made available to states to expand the availability of navigators in One-Stops.

Create special teams or committees

Universal Access Committee

The Universal Access Committee in New Orleans was comprised of many members with disabilities and professionals from disability organizations, including a staff person from the local advocacy center. This committee served as an ongoing forum for disability-related matters in the One-Stops, addressing such issues as accessibility, disability training, marketing, and obtaining feedback from customers with disabilities in a secure, confidential way.

Create external linkages with disability-specific community agencies

Building external linkages increases the likelihood that One-Stop partners will access the expertise available in the community when providing training on disability issues, considering marketing strategies, or making decisions about adaptive equipment. For example, the Los Angeles One-Stops capitalized on the expertise of the Center for Assistive Technology (CAT), based at Goodwill. The city contracted with CAT, which examined each One-Stop in a consistent manner, identified technology needs, and made recommendations. The Resource Center for Independent Living, a partner in the One-Stop system in Utica, New York, provided training on accessibility and adaptive equipment to One-Stop staff. They not only assisted staff with providing core services but had desk space and saw their own customers as well as ones from the One-Stop.

Develop methods for addressing concerns over performance measures

If concerns over the ability of people with significant disabilities to meet performance measures are perceived as a barrier for service delivery, this is a major issue that should be addressed by both the One-Stop management and the Local Workforce Investment Board. One-Stop management should ensure that frontline staff have a clear understanding of how performance measures operate and what their relationship is to service delivery. It should be clear to all staff that every customer is entitled to core services. In addition, staff should understand that performance measures vary by funding source, and that WIA performance measures only apply to services covered by WIA funds. Successful One-Stop seek out a variety of funding sources so that they are able to support individuals in ways that are not tied to WIA performance measures.

One-Stop partners should discuss this issue with staff and the impact it has on service delivery decisions. Staff need a true understanding of various performance measures and methods for effective management. Additionally, the Local Workforce Investment Board should have clear policies regarding the relationship between service delivery decisions and performance measures. This reinforces the notion that performance measures should not be a barrier to services for individual customers.

Make assistive technology work for job seekers with significant disabilities

Training and practice

Adequate training on how to operate all facets of assistive technology should be offered, with an emphasis on staff gaining hands-on experience. For example, in Los Angeles, a technology trainer who is blind came into each One-Stop, and staff were required to work with her as if she were a customer. One manager in Utica required all staff to become knowledgeable about the equipment, software, and material, and to devote a portion of the week to assisting customers in the resource area. Another interesting strategy to continually update and enhance staff knowledge of technology was the creation of a telephone helpline in Clark County. This allowed staff to connect with a technology specialist who provided advice and guidance on how to use the equipment. Not all staff members need be experts on all assistive technology; however, this knowledge is critical for resource room staff. In addition, simple desk aids with instruction on how to use assistive technology can be an excellent resource for both staff and customers.

Consider cognitive disabilities

Often the type of adaptive computer technology available in resource rooms does not meet the needs of people with cognitive disabilities. Specially adapted computer programs for this population are commercially available, but One-Stops do not not typically have them in the resource areas. Los Angeles added WYNN Wizard and WYNN Reader software onto its computers to assist job seekers who had learning difficulties or could not read.

Make the most of limited resources

Assistive technology represents a significant fiscal outlay. As a result, Los Angeles and Utica staff created a lending library of technology for people who had found jobs through the One-Stop Center but did not have the funds for technology. If the job seeker needed technology for an interview or assessment, it was available for use. The job seeker could also "sign out" the equipment during the transitional time in a new job until the employer could address their technology needs. The Colorado Springs One-Stop Center applied for special grant funding to pay unemployed computer professionals to provide support with assistive technology. In Los Angeles, CAT was identified as the one entity responsible for buying all the adaptive equipment. This created consistency in planning and purchasing, and increased buying power when ordering large quantities. Clark County created an ad hoc work group that served a similar purpose, overseeing the sharing and borrowing of devices. Finally, the Los Angeles One-Stops became more selective in their technology purchases by using local demographic information to match assistive technology purchases with populations served.

Involve job seekers with disabilities and the disability community in service design

It is crucial to hear directly from people with disabilities and the disability community to inform the design, development, and implementation of services. Two Los Angeles disability provider organizations, Goodwill and Build Rehabilitation, were critical in establishing the One-Stop infrastructure. They helped equip One-Stops with assistive technology and arranged staff training on disability issues. In New Orleans, Goodwill staff gave their input regarding organizational goals, innovative ideas, and best practice models they wanted to learn more about. The Resource Center for Independent Living in Utica became involved in planning and has been an active member of the workforce partnership.

Provide training on supporting people with disabilities

Training and certificate programs can be a resource for building staff capacity and comfort levels in working with individuals with disabilities. For example, the Legacy training in Los Angeles consisted of an online course and live classroom training by experts in the disability field. The online course, which provided participants with foundation and core competency skills, had several training modules. The first module introduced participants to the various strategies and the skills needed to provide equal access to One-Stop programs and services. This gave participants the knowledge to complete more specialized modules addressing major types of disabilities. After successfully completing the online course and the live training, participants received a certificate.

Focus on recruiting job seekers with significant disabilities

Use disability-specific community-based organizations

A common outreach strategy is to use relationships with community organizations to generate referrals. Representatives can be invited to participate in special recruitment committees. A job-shadowing program through the Braille Institute in Los Angeles helped market the One-Stop to people with visual impairments. Through participation in the program, individuals gained exposure to the One-Stop and One-Stop staff gained experience in working with job seekers with disabilities.

Create teams and positions

The importance placed on articulating and "selling" programs and services can be seen in the existence of marketing, outreach, and public relations committees and positions. Formal presentations and mobile outreach efforts to community groups, centers for independent living, homeless shelters, and departments of mental health and mental retardation will increase knowledge of services and how the One-Stops may help their clients. Data is also an effective means for understanding the type of customer who is accessing services, and can be useful for marketing to specific groups.

CONCLUSION

There is a wide range of strategies for creating a welcoming environment for individuals with significant disabilities. Many require relatively minor adaptations that lead to significantly enhanced capacity to meet the needs of all customers. Each of these techniques has enhanced the use of One-Stops for job seekers with disabilities. We offer these strategies to provoke discussion and creativity among One-Stops as they consider their own needs and challenges that they face in serving all job seekers effectively.

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