

Effective partnerships: Collaborative efforts that support Customized Employment

Sheila Fesko*, Elena Varney, Cori DiBiase and Mandy Hippenstiel
Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA, USA

Accepted August 2007

Abstract. For individuals with significant disabilities, effective customized employment services often require the support and coordination of multiple entities and/or funding sources. This article describes a variety of partnership models that have been developed among the workforce development system and disability providers. Examples of partnerships demonstrated by Customized Employment and WorkFORCE Action grantees are provided, as well as practical suggestions for local implementation.

Keywords: Customized employment, disability, WorkFORCE action

1. Introduction

Collaborative efforts that convene a variety of resources, funding and expertise can contribute to successful customized employment opportunities. These resources may be elicited through formal systems such as providers, state agencies, or educational systems, as well as through informal sources, such as friends, family and community members with which an individual is involved. For job seekers with more significant disabilities, because of the potential range of life complexities experienced, multiple service delivery systems may need to be engaged [11]. When utilized effectively, partnerships work to identify, pull together, and coordinate resources efficiently, capitalize and build on the strengths of each partner while reducing duplication of effort. Such partnerships have emerged in providing customized employment services for individuals with significant disabilities within the context of the workforce development system. Their experiences provide valuable lessons regarding creative partnerships.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) brought together various federal job training and employment pro-

grams to work in concert and create one comprehensive service system in the US. Job seekers, including those with disabilities, may access this system through a network of One-Stop Career Centers (One-Stops). Among WIA's core tenets are: the individual empowerment of the job seeker; universally accessible services; increased accountability of providers; enhanced state and local flexibility; and streamlined services [6]. These services are developed, designed, and implemented by a variety of mandated and non-mandated partners in the One-Stop system. The public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency is one of 19 mandated partners of the One-Stops. Other partners mandated by this legislation include Employment Services, Adult Education, Post-Secondary Vocational Education, Title V of the Older Americans Act, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Veterans Employment and Training Programs, Community Services Block Grant, Unemployment Insurance, and the WIA Adult, Dislocated, and Youth activities (WIA, PL 106–170), among others. The potential array of non-mandated partners is vast, and may include community-based employment support organizations, advocacy groups, and faith-based organizations, to name a few.

To fully integrate all service providers, WIA strongly encourages collaboration between public and private agencies. The underlying assumption is that no single agency is entirely equipped to serve all types

* Address for correspondence: Sheila Fesko, Institute for Community Inclusion/University of Massachusetts, Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125, USA. Tel.: +1 617 287 4365; E-mail: Sheila.fesko@umb.edu.

of customers, making interagency collaboration essential [12]. While Vocational Rehabilitation is the only mandated partner with a specific focus on serving individuals with disabilities [8], local communities have begun to look at innovative partnerships between the One-Stop and community mental health centers, center for independent living, and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) [5].

The focus on a variety of partners within the One-Stop was designed to be mutually beneficial, whereby the One-Stop can profit from disability providers' and VRs' expertise regarding accessibility, assistive technology, and accommodations, while providers can avail themselves of the One-Stop's workshops, job search services, and employer contacts [2,8]. A well-developed partnership will allow the resources of all partners to be used in a broader yet more efficient fashion, while allowing individual partners to contribute in their particular areas of expertise [2,8].

Many decisions concerning One-Stop management, service provision and potential partnerships are driven locally, allowing for considerable variability across and within states. Despite this variation there are some consistent themes with regard to the challenges presented as partnerships are developed. Each of the partners coming in to the One-Stop have different policies, procedures and cultures which need to be addressed to improve coordination [1]. Obstacles encountered in merging the various cultures of partnering agencies, as well as staff concerns about the loss of professional identities have impeded the collaborative process [4, 14]. Concerns about programmatic and physical accessibility, as well as protecting client confidentiality while sharing space and data within the One-Stop system have in some cases hampered the full integration of VR or other disability-oriented partners [14]. Furthermore, while services within the disability system are provided with more of a guided or supportive approach, utilizing the One-Stop system requires a high level of self-direction and may be perceived as overwhelming to those with less experience in the job search process [7].

In spite of these barriers, research findings indicate that interagency collaboration positively affects service delivery for customers with disabilities. For example, Timmons, Schuster, Hamner, and Bose [13] conducted research on perspectives of persons with disabilities of the One-Stops. They found that consumers with disabilities, especially those who used multiple supports, were highly satisfied with their experiences when agencies worked together to better meet their needs. Similarly, Fesko, Cohen, Hamner, Boeltzig, and Timmons [3]

found that job seekers with disabilities benefited from working with more than one counselor. Because different counselors had expertise in specific areas, they complemented one another and were able to avoid service duplication. Finally, interagency coordination can be the solution to complex, inconsistent, and unresponsive systems [14] since it provides a central point, or one-stop for the job seeker to receive assistance.

When providing customized employment, the richness of the process and outcome can be enhanced through the effective use of partners. Different perspectives, skill sets and networks can be brought into the process as well as potential resources for the funding of services [9]. The job seeker controls both the planning process and the resources that support their job search effort, while other entities act as partners to facilitate the process.

1.1. Customized Employment grant initiative

Customized Employment strategies offer a new set of tools to advance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The Office of Disability Employment Policy in the US Department of Labor initiated a series of demonstration projects to identify policy issues that support the use of Customized Employment strategies in the workforce development system.

The Customized Employment grant initiative aimed to increase the capacity of One-Stop Career Centers to provide seamless and quality employment services for people with significant disabilities, resulting in competitive jobs that pay at least minimum wage and offer opportunities for career advancement. To that end, each grantee worked to infuse Customized Employment services into the local One-Stop delivery system. The grant recipients were Local Workforce Investment Boards (LWIBs), who received funds to build the capacity of local One-Stop Centers to provide Customized Employment services to persons with disabilities who were not typically targeted for services by the One-Stop system. Grants funded under this program provided a vehicle for LWIBs to systemically review their policies and practices around disability, and to incorporate new and innovative practices to improve integrated employment outcomes.

The Customized Employment grant initiative was initially funded by ODEP in FY 01 when eight grants were awarded, and those grants continued for five years. Eight additional projects were funded in FY 02 for four years, and five grants were awarded in FY 03 for three years.

1.2. WorkFORCE action grants

The Working for Freedom, Opportunity, and Real Choice Through Community Employment (WorkFORCE) Action grant initiative continued ODEP's development and documentation of programs that enable participation in community employment through customized employment strategies. The goal of the grant program was to support local nonprofit organizations to demonstrate Customized Employment strategies for persons with disabilities covered by the Olmstead Supreme Court decision of 1999 (Olmstead v. L.C., 527 US 581, 119 S. Ct. 2176–1999). The target groups to be served were people with disabilities who were either unemployed or underemployed and who were:

- In non-work, segregated work, or transitioning to work settings;
- Covered under the Olmstead decision and/or Executive Order; and therefore part of the state's overall Olmstead planning process; or
- Awaiting employment service and supports following a move from a residential facility, or part of a plan to move into the community under the Supreme Court's decision in Olmstead and/or Olmstead Executive Order.

These grants were awarded to community providers who then partnered with their workforce development system and LWIB. The first WorkFORCE Action Grants were awarded in FY 02, with three grants funded for four years. An additional three grants were awarded in FY 03, which were funded for three years.

2. Method

Information for this report was collected from all 26 Customized Employment and WorkFORCE Action grantees by staff at the National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult (NCWD). NCWD was the technical assistance provider to the grantees though funding by the Office of Disability Employment Policy. Technical Assistance site coordinators were responsible for providing consultation, resources and information to their designated sites, as well as for gathering and integrating information from and across projects.

Information collection was a process of formal and informal efforts to identify the key lessons/accomplishment and challenges experienced by each grant. Discussions with key personnel and review of quarterly re-

ports and supporting documentation contributed to the overall findings. Information was collected in the areas of partnership and collaboration, integration of service delivery strategies into the workforce development system, leveraging resources, policy and systemic influences and sustainability of grant activities. This article focuses specifically on the partnership and collaboration element.

Individual reports were generated for each grant site. Technical assistance staff reviewed and cross-referenced all individual reports and identified consistent themes across grantees. The findings described below are based on the themes that emerged relating to effective partnerships.

3. Findings

Partnerships are the cornerstone of both the workforce development system and the systems that support the employment of people with disabilities. As the interface between these systems developed, grantees entered a new realm of collaboration. Understanding these systems' parameters and operating conditions, coming to consensus on common goals, and redefining roles in response to these goals created opportunities on both the direct service and system levels.

The mix of partners involved with each project was varied based on the method of implementation, primary project focus, and the community in which it was based, to name a few factors. To illustrate the array of partners involved, a sampling is highlighted here:

- Local and state WIBs
- CRPs
- Public VR
- Small business administrations
- Faith-based organizations
- Wagner Peyser/Employment services
- Departments of Developmental Disabilities/Mental Retardation
- Business Leadership Networks
- Public school systems
- United Way
- Assistive technology centers
- Universities
- State Departments of Labor
- Independent Living Centers
- Legal Aid
- Advocacy organizations
- Veterans' programs
- Mental Health organizations

Refugee organizations
 Court systems
 Micro Enterprise centers

While the above list represents the array of partners engaged with these projects, generally, the potential range of diverse partners is essentially unlimited, provided that the mutual goal of assisting individuals with achieving and maintaining employment success is maintained. As part of the external evaluation of the ODEP grantees, the wide range of partners and the contribution of services and resources were noted [1].

Similar to the variation in the range of partners that participated in these projects, there was considerable differences with regard to service delivery areas, primary implementers, project goals, and implementation methods. Each grantee designed its project to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the area and their operations. Projects were generally designed in one of the three following ways:

1. Project activities and service provision stayed primarily with One-Stop staff and management.
2. Activities were based primarily within the One-Stop, while a disability provider, Community Rehabilitation Provider, or other entity was responsible for implementing the individual services.
3. Project activities were primarily based externally at a CRP.

As a result of the funding parameters, the grant recipient for WorkFORCE Action grants were disability providers and so were more likely to implement the latter model.

The particular method of implementation had a significant impact on partnerships – their members, evolution, and challenges. The model utilized also contributed to the setting of priorities for projects and their success – or lack thereof – in achieving systems change.

Each implementation design offered its own set of strengths and issues. When project activities were based within the One-Stop and implemented through One-Stop staff and management, there was a clear perception that the One-Stop system was the target of change. Disability partners' expertise was needed to equip One-Stop staff with knowledge and skills. One-Stop staff generally acquired an understanding of disability issues and the ability to shift from standardized services towards a customized approach. Still, it remained a challenge to merge the culture of a performance-based, self-serve system with a customer-centered model that leveraged multiple resources and customized services.

This model was typically more effective for systems change, as WIBs were generally more invested in the effort and could often bring policy and systems change, to some degree, to the state level. In a few cases, with intensive technical assistance, the system was able to adopt Customized Employment services, although this often presented as a challenge and/or lower priority for grantees working within this model. More often, successes with this model included enhanced collaborations with the disability services system, improved access to the range of One-Stop services, enhanced policies and partner agreements through modifying Memorandums Of Understanding (MOUs), and the adoption of Customized Employment strategies and principles customization by One-Stop partners.

Those projects that utilized the second model identified above faced their own challenges with partnerships. When the CRP was primarily responsible for services, yet based within the One-Stop, it was not as clear to all involved that the One-Stop system was the target of change. Prior to project implementation, some One-Stop staff would automatically defer customers with disabilities to VR services. Once projects were underway, this practice often morphed into a similar deferral to the project staff. This problem required mentoring and education to staff about serving customers with disabilities and presenting the full menu of One-Stop services, with VR and/or project involvement as an additional option rather than the default. When the disability provider drove project activities, they frequently found it challenging to gain buy-in from the WIB/One-Stop, thereby impeding significant systems change. Some grantees had to choose between either influencing One-Stops systems change *or* providing quality Customized Employment services to individuals with significant disabilities. However, providers often met with success in training One-Stop staff and mentoring service delivery for customers with disabilities, as well as accessing various partner resources to accomplish this.

When project activities were externally based at a CRP, partnerships with the disability community were more forthcoming while engagement of the One-Stop system often proved more challenging. WIBs were typically less engaged. These projects focused primarily on enhancing service delivery and achieving quality Customized Employment outcomes. Although there were varying degrees of success, the focus on systems change in the One-stop may have been diminished with this model, with the emphasis instead on demonstrating individual employment outcomes and linkages between the disability services and One-Stop systems. How-

ever, these projects made progress implementing creative employment strategies and building the capacity of VR, CRPs, and sometimes nontraditional partners to provide Customized Employment services. Targeting specific partners who could benefit from the universal application of Customized Employment strategies (e.g., TANF, Veterans, older worker, ex-offenders) proved particularly effective with this model. Communities also often increased their commitment to the goal of enhancing employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Regardless of how projects were organized, partners inside and outside of the workforce development system had to come to understand their partners before effective collaboration could occur. Interface between the disability services system and the workforce development system was often a process of merging cultures and employment philosophy, including the belief in the capacity of people with disabilities to work. Grantees spent varying degrees of time and effort in recognizing differences and coming to consensus on common language, expectations, definitions, and outcomes.

3.1. Strategies for effective partnerships

While grantees used different models to design and implement their projects, there were common experiences in what they found contributed to effective partnerships.

3.1.1. Understanding partners

Many grantees found that fully understanding their various partner and support programs and the parameters under which they functioned was a critical first step in fostering collaboration and interdependence. In partnering across the workforce development, disability, and employer systems, they found that each had its own distinct terminology and definitions for similar activities which made it essential to establish common language and definitions among partners. Projects also credited co-location, a strong working knowledge of partner systems and their policies, and an understanding of all the employment service providers in the community as beneficial to facilitating partnerships.

3.1.2. Building on preexisting partnerships

When initiating collaboration, using existing relationships moved efforts forward. Some projects selected their primary subcontractors based on previous relationships and experiences, consistent values, and the specific expertise offered while others found that inte-

grating efforts into existing partnerships or collaborations helped reduce the time needed to establish new relationships at the project's onset. By capitalizing on relationships and accomplishments of previous and existing initiatives, projects had access to a friendly entry point from which to establish credibility within new systems.

3.1.3. Identifying shared values and a common vision

Grantees emphasized the need to identify shared values that influenced professionals and the agencies they represented. They found that systemic change was as much about changing individual minds as affecting policy and that before introducing specific employment models or advancing toward this systemic change, it was necessary to invest time in promoting, universally, the idea that everyone can work. Establishing a cohesive and committed team that shared this vision and clearly defining goals with apparent beneficial outcomes helped to build trust, interest, investment, and support. These effects were also achieved by clearly identifying the value that Customized Employment strategies added to other systems and promoting their broad applicability to a larger audience through dissemination.

3.1.4. Partnerships enhanced through collaborative service delivery

Both the partnerships themselves and the progress towards systems change were promoted through collaborative efforts on the individual customer level. In many cases, the enthusiasm of staff about their direct work with job seekers and the resulting tangible best practices, led to lasting partnerships built on the strength of shared successes and a powerful dissemination practice. For other projects, the successful establishment of small businesses for customers with disabilities and the recognition of these meaningful outcomes acted as a catalyst for broad local service partnerships. Also effective in strengthening partnerships and promoting further collaboration was the successful braiding of funds and services for mutual customers. These individual successes often led to formal resource sharing agreements, helping to build lasting partnerships and foster large scale systemic and policy change.

3.1.5. Multilevel partnerships

Though collaborative service delivery is an effective way to demonstrate new ways of conducting business and promoting systems change, state- and federal-level support was also necessary to bring the effort to

a broader scale. Effective systems change needed to occur at all levels: national, state, and local. Projects found that linking local and statewide levels allowed all participants to learn from one another and provided a forum for further networking. To achieve state level systems change, representatives with decision-making authority over funding and organizational commitment were involved at the onset and committees engaged in a comprehensive examination of the state employment service system. The gap between local- and state-level participants was often bridged by the consistent discussion of the lessons learned and information gleaned through service delivery at regularly scheduled working group meetings.

3.1.6. *Collaborative opportunities*

Those grantees that clearly defined the roles and tasks of partners as the project evolved were successful in maintaining their continued commitment and engagement. In some instances, a cohesive relationship was built on a series of collaborative activities, including active involvement in employment-related initiatives, service implementation meetings, strategic planning events, consortium meetings, integration task force meetings, and the establishment of a WIB disability advisory council. Other sites found partner-based work groups to be effective, particularly when they were assisted by an outside facilitator, based on mutually agreed-upon goals, and met regularly. While grantees capitalized on a wide variety of collaboration techniques, all relied on a clear project organizational structure in order to achieve the identified goals and outcomes.

3.1.7. *Institutionalizing practices through customized support teams*

Effective partnerships were also realized through the establishment of Customized Support Teams. These teams worked jointly to plan with and support an individual job seeker. Specific sites institutionalized the practice of using such teams to meet the needs of their job seekers with barriers to employment. Customized Support Teams consisted of multiple partners, each of whom took some responsibility for elements of an individual's service delivery needs. While this practice was time-consuming, it typically resulted in success for individuals who needed more supports than a single organization could provide. The composition of the support team and roles that staff played was driven by the individual and based on the employment resources, networks and partners with whom they are/may be affil-

iated. For example, one job seekers support team may be comprised of a disability benefits counselor, a WIA case manager, CRP and TANF representatives, family member, and of course, the job seeker him/herself.

3.1.8. *Impacting the way systems "do business"*

Developing partnerships often face the challenge of changing the fundamental environment in which partners operate. Funding cuts and staff turnover are elements of the culture that exacerbate such challenges. They heighten the need for additional training, continued support through technical assistance, and quality assurance monitoring to sustain Customized Employment services within agencies. Otherwise, Customized Employment services may be diffused to the point of ineffectiveness and result in lesser outcomes.

In several communities, grantees made a concerted effort to enhance the capacity of One-Stops and CRPs to provide employment services to job seekers with disabilities by providing regular training on Customized Employment and disability issues to One-Stop staff and community partners. Another site created a more formal Customized Employment training program for staff from One-Stops, state agencies, and community service providers to ensure that the quality of services was high. Through their Service Provider Consortium, community partners could access a range of staff training on a regular basis, including topics such as Customized Employment approaches, building effective employer relationships, and other practices to improve the overall quality of service delivery. Because training and short-term technical assistance may not be enough to modify long-standing practices, oversight and quality assurance checks were critical in supporting partners with adopting new practices and resisting the inclination to resume how they typically "do business".

3.1.9. *Systematizing service delivery collaboration*

In a number of sites, challenges emerged around mutual understanding and service delivery arrangements. To address this issue, grantees created various forms of clear, written agreements – formal and informal – that recognized common objectives and interdependent roles and responsibilities. In one instance, MOU's were developed between a local WIB and mental health provider which helped each entity become conscious of the mutually beneficial relationship. Another MOU was developed between a One-Stop and VR to help surmount the barriers that had been created by the lack of clearly outlined objectives and responsibilities. School systems, juvenile programs, and faith-based organiza-

tions also sought to formalize efforts to ensure that these services were provided in a deliberate and consistent manner.

4. Recommendations

Collaboration was the primary innovation of most of the grant sites, and the foundation of all other systems change efforts. Whether considering policy change, resource allocation, or service integration, effective collaboration was at the root of most successes. Collaborative efforts hinged on attaining a shared understanding between systems and being able to translate that relationship into formal, tangible goals that positively affected each system and its customers. Regular meetings with formal, established goals, shared management, implementation of experimental projects, and aggressive sharing of best practices and information typified the best work of grantees in this area.

The following recommendations focus on partnerships within local workforce development, as well as federal recommendations that support and encourage collaboration within the system with the goal of quality employment outcomes for people with significant barriers to employment.

4.1. Local Recommendations

4.1.1. Position One-Stops as the hub of local collaborative efforts

One-Stop Career Centers are a natural hub around which partnerships and collaborations between public and private service providers, businesses, and consumer groups can operate. An attitude that encourages collaborative efforts should be an element of operation in every One-Stop, exemplified by management, staff training, and public outreach. The following are some steps a local One-Stop can take to institutionalize collaboration:

- Basic information (e.g., the purpose, customer base, and services offered) on local agencies and organizations engaged in human services and workforce/economic development is made available to staff, partners, and customers, and incorporated as a key element of staff training.
- Staff are informed of the various ways that a One-Stop can partner with an organization – everything from short-term shared case management to MOUs and co-location – and are empowered and trained to reach out not only to customers but to potential partners as well.

- One-Stop public events and outreach/marketing presentations focus on recruiting potential partners, as well as business and job seeker customers.
- One-Stop leaders identify other leaders in the community and seek to work closely with them to design services strategically.

4.1.2. Disability providers must also reach out to the One-Stops

Disability providers have a responsibility to engage with their local One-Stop to create and encourage partnerships across a range of entities. One-Stops vary to the extent with which they have tried to engage non-mandated partners and/or in their capacity to provide services that are universally accessible to all customers. If your local one-stop has not reached out to the disability community, it is critical that you take the first steps to build this relationship. Partnerships are based on mutual benefit and the disability community needs to understand and take advantage of the resources of the One-Stops. Grantees demonstrated that significant change is possible when non-traditional partnerships are developed. Examples of where disability providers could begin to partner with the One-stop system include:

- Accessing training and other services to meet a consumer need
- Co-teaching of workshops
- Use of One-Stop space for individual and group activities
- Consultation on disability issues
- Provide training to One-Stop staff
- Collaborative service delivery
- Becoming a vendor for WIA and other funds

4.1.3. Engage leaders as a key element of collaboration and system change

Leaders from every system should engage in collaborative efforts at the local level. Buy-in and understanding on the part of leaders are essential to the success of long-term, effective collaborations.

To this end, WIB and One-Stop administration can create a guide to engage WIB members to some extent in the functions of the One-Stop. Unlike leaders in other employment systems, WIB members are frequently businesspeople who have little knowledge of the actual workings of workforce development agencies and organizations. Too frequently, these bodies are used not as genuine partners in service delivery but as review boards for policies and practices in which they are not

truly engaged. It is the responsibility of staff to provide these boards with appropriate opportunities to exercise real control and provide real contributions.

Partners should also be engaged with the board. As an employer in the community, CRP can join LWIBs as business members and ensure that their need for a skilled and trained workforce is addressed as well as supporting the efforts of the job seekers to whom they provide support.

4.1.4. Seek to engage a broad range of potential partners and creative partnership arrangements

Each partner represents a unique contribution of resources and expertise. One-Stops should be open to the widest possible range of partners, and to accommodating a creative variety of partnership modes with the intention of becoming the center of a network of cooperative resources. For example, faith-based organizations and legal aid services brought resources to the One-Stop that had not previously been available. These groups helped address other needs that affected individuals' ability to pursue work. The level of partners' commitment varied as well. Some entities provided time-limited activities through a referral process; others established a regular presence in the One-Stop so they could serve their customers in that setting and be available for questions or quick referrals.

4.1.5. Invest the time and commitment necessary to establish effective partnerships

Whether a mandated or non-mandated partner, true collaboration may take time to achieve. Each partner agency has its own set of challenges, restrictions, outcomes and cultures. Determine what resources and/or services you, as a partner, bring to the table to support the system's goals. Collaborative efforts range from shared service delivery to applying for joint funding, to engaging in systems change initiatives. Be prepared to speak to how your involvement will have mutual benefit through staff skill development, improved employment outcomes, outreach and marketing, access to employer relationships, expanded resources, or the like. Maintaining a consistent presence within the system will advance efforts toward enriching the level of collaboration.

4.1.6. Engage partners in regular, focused and goal-oriented communication

Without overloading staff or partner schedules, regular (monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly) meetings held with partner management and staff are an important means to continually build and enliven collaboration. This model typically evolves out of shared activities or projects, but the consistency and effectiveness of communication can be as meaningful as the activities of the project itself.

Absent a specific project (such as a grant), these meetings can be used to establish and promote common goals between collaborative organizations. These might include projects and a jointly managed caseload, or simply a mutually determined list of goals for systemic change. The essential feature is that consistent, goal-oriented communication emerge and be sustained as a feature of standard operation.

4.2. Federal recommendations

4.2.1. Create an interagency work group on collaboration

Federal workforce development authorities should form an interagency work group to promote seamless and collaboration at the state and local levels. This group could potentially take responsibility for initiating many of the following recommendations across members' various agencies.

4.2.2. Sponsor information briefs on various partner systems and their role in state and local workforce development

At the local and state levels, lack of knowledge regarding other agencies is often the key barrier to collaboration. An important first step towards local and state partnerships would be to create information briefs describing the basic purpose of other agencies, the population they serve, the resources available, and the services they provide.

4.2.3. Include a "ramp up" period for partnership-building in future long-term systems change grants

A solid foundation of collaboration is essential to work involving complicated service delivery and systemic change. As such, long-term grants should include a period of time, potentially at a lower rate of funding than later years, which allows grant sites to build a foundation of partnership. Funding rates should allow some service delivery, as practice is often the best

means to strengthen partnership, but should not expect service levels equal to later years.

Provide training and technical assistance on successful partnering practices. Currently, around the country there are examples of creative practices that have led to win/win situations for public and private agencies, increased resources, and better outcomes for adults with disabilities. A compendium of these practices should be developed and disseminated to key leaders within WIA, along with the technical assistance to achieve them.

4.2.4. *Model effective collaboration at the federal level by funding grant initiatives across agencies*

Federal agencies need to communicate the importance of partnership through their actions and funding priorities. Identifying areas of common interest at the federal agency level, as well as potential barriers to local collaboration will result in a model demonstration effort that could provide states and local communities the flexibility to make some significant systems change.

5. Conclusion

Through the implementation of the ODEP-funded Customized Employment and WorkFORCE Action grants, customized employment is becoming nationally recognized for its value as a set of effective strategies that result in meaningful employment outcomes for individuals with significant barriers to employment. The innovative strategies implemented through these projects to initiate, maintain and advance collaborations have resulted in new possibilities for the provision of customized employment services.

Whether job seekers face significant barriers to employment based on disability, homelessness or other life complexities, it is clear that a mix of resources is required to achieve employment success. No one system has the funding, resources, or flexibility to fully meet these needs. Only through shared expertise, resources, and funding, can meaningful outcomes begin to materialize.

The One-Stops are a relatively new model for the workforce system with has good potential for partnering with the disability services system. In working in unison with a variety of mandated and non-mandated partners toward the common goal of meeting the needs of mutual job seekers, customized employment offers a new set of tools and method of partnering that results

in tangible employment outcomes. By recognizing the systemic parameters, organizational cultures, and partner dynamics, and by advancing collaborative service delivery, exploring creative funding opportunities and formalizing partnership arrangements, these systems have established a truly collaborative relationship to achieve employment outcomes not previously realized for their customers with significant disabilities.

Acknowledgments

This is a publication of the National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult. The center is based at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and funded through the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) grant number E-9-4-1-0071. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the US Department of Labor, nor does mention of tradenames, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor.

References

- [1] L. Elinson, W.D. Frey, M.A. Beemer, J.K. Riley and H.R. Kruger, *Evaluation of Disability Employment Policy Demonstration Programs Task 10: Demonstration Program Progress to Date: A Synthesis of Key Findings, Issues, and Lessons Learned Interim Progress Report*, Rockville, MD: Westat, 2005.
- [2] B.G. Elliott, M.D. Tashjian, P.A. Neenan, D.A. Levine and L.R. Chewing, *Implementation of the Workforce Investment Act: Adult Literacy and Disability Perspectives. First Interim Report for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program*, Prepared for Rehabilitation Services Administration, US Department of Education. Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute, 2002.
- [3] S.L. Fesko, A. Cohen, D. Hamner, H. Boeltzig and J.C. Timmons, *Toward an understanding of how adults with disabilities are served through the One-Stop system: Case study research across six sites*, Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP, Children's Hospital, 2003.
- [4] S.L. Fesko, A.C. Cohen and W. Bailey, *Restructuring for partnership between disability and generic service systems: Partnership between VR and Workforce Development, Improving Employment Outcomes: Collaboration across the Disability and Workforce Development Systems*, Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, 2002, 75-89.
- [5] A.C. Hall, J.C. Timmons, H. Boeltzig, D. Hamner and S.L. Fesko, *Toward an understanding of how adults with disabilities are served through the One-Stop system: Case study research across six sites Year 4 report*, Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP, UMass Boston, 2007.

- [6] P. Holcomb and B. Barnow, *Serving People with Disabilities through the Workforce Investment Act's One-Stop Career Centers*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
- [7] D. Hamner, J.C. Timmons and J. Bose, A continuum of services: Guided and self-directed approaches to service delivery, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* **13**(2) (2002), 104–112.
- [8] D. Hoff, *WIA and One-Stop Centers: Opportunities and issues for the disability community* [Tools for Inclusion 10 (1)], Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion (UAP), Children's Hospital, 2000.
- [9] National Center on Workforce and Disability, *Customized Employment: Practical Solutions for Employment Success*, Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP, UMass Boston, 2006.
- [10] *Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 US 581, 119 S. Ct. 2176–1999.
- [11] R. Silverstein, An overview of the emerging disability policy framework: A guidepost for analyzing public policy, *Iowa Law Review* **85** (2000), 1757.
- [12] J.C. Timmons, A. Cohen and S.L. Fesko, Merging cultural differences and professional identities: Strategies for maximizing collaborative efforts during the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act, *Journal of Rehabilitation* **70**(1) (2004), 19–27.
- [13] J.C. Timmons, J. Schuster, D. Hamner and J. Bose, Ingredient for success: Consumer perspective on five essential elements to service delivery, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* **17** (2002), 183–194.
- [14] J.C. Timmons, J. Whitney-Thomas, J. McIntyre, J. Butterworth and D. Allen, Managing service delivery systems and the role of parents during their children's transition, *Journal of Rehabilitation* **70** (2004), 2.
- [15] Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1988, PL. 105-220, 29 U.S.C. 701 et seq.

Copyright of Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation is the property of IOS Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.