

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
REHABILITATION SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

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DATE: March 26, 2001

ADDRESSEES: STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES (GENERAL)
STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES (BLIND)
STATE REHABILITATION COUNCILS
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS
PROTECTION & ADVOCACY OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS PROGRAMS
REGIONAL REHABILITATION CONTINUING EDUCATION
PROGRAMS
AMERICAN INDIAN VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICE
PROGRAMS
RSA SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

SUBJECT: A Summary of Representative Linkages Between Vocational Rehabilitation
(VR) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Programs.

CONTENT: The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to provide State VR
agencies and their constituencies with a summary of updated information
regarding the ways in which VR and the TANF program can partner in order to
better serve TANF recipients with disabilities. The document attached to this
memorandum was originally issued by the Rehabilitation Services Administration
(RSA) in 1998. It has been updated periodically since that time.

The document has two main sections. First, it discusses some of the common
characteristics of VR/TANF linkages. Second, it provides a summary of the
activities of various States and tribes to serve more effectively TANF recipients
with disabilities.

VR agencies that wish to use this document in their discussions with other
workforce partners should feel free to do so. RSA is working to ensure that
this or a similar issuance is shared with TANF programs nationwide.

The document is not an exhaustive list of States conducting promising
partnerships between VR and TANF. If you feel that your State's efforts

should be added to a future version, or if you have any questions regarding VR and TANF linkages, please contact Ms. Jenn Rigger, RSA's Central Office Employment Specialist, at (202) 260-2179, or via email at jenn_rigger@ed.gov.

Mark Shoob
Deputy Commissioner

Attachment

cc: COUNCIL OF STATE ADMINISTRATORS OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON INDEPENDENT LIVING
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY SYSTEMS
NATIONAL REHABILITATION FACILITIES COALITION

Representative Linkages Between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program

Introduction:

In the course of implementing welfare reform, considerable attention has been given to what factors contribute most significantly to long-term welfare dependency. One factor that appears to have serious implications for those labeled hardest-to-serve is the presence of disabilities. Individuals with physical, sensory, mental, cognitive, or emotional impairments often require support and/or accommodation in order to succeed in the workplace. For individuals with undiagnosed or hidden disabilities, or those without access to vocational services and supports, attempts to enter or remain in the workforce are less likely to succeed. Current data indicate that between 30 and 40 percent of welfare recipients have disabilities. This context provides insight into the types of services that might assist an individual receiving TANF to move off of benefits and begin working.

For 80 years, a Federal and State partnership has existed to assist individuals with disabilities to enter or return to the world of work. The VR program, overseen at the Federal level by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within the Department of Education, provides services to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving their vocational goal. The program is funded through a formula grant with an approximate 20 percent State match requirement. Some of the services provided to individuals determined eligible could include: assessment, counseling, vocational training (including on-the-job training), supported employment, job placement, and rehabilitation technology services and devices.

Given its long history in providing these types of services to individuals with disabilities, VR is, in many respects, a valuable asset to welfare reform efforts on the State and local levels. In fact, many States around the country have begun to build TANF/VR partnerships. While it may be too early in some areas to gauge the success of these partnerships, early evaluations indicate that they are proving beneficial to the overall success of welfare reform.

There are many ways in which VR and TANF can partner. In an effort to provide information about some of the types of partnerships that currently exist, RSA has compiled abstracts from 12 State and Tribal VR agencies. They were chosen for their representative characteristics and should not be considered an exhaustive list of States with effective models of coordination. There are other States and localities doing excellent work in this area, and RSA will continue to pass along new information as it is received.

Within some or all of these partnerships, there are several characteristics that stand out:

- Organizational Structure of TANF and VR -- In several examples, TANF and VR are located under the same umbrella agency of State government. While this does not necessarily dictate a close working relationship, it appears to foster cooperation between the two entities.

- TANF and VR Co-location of Personnel -- Where co-location of agency personnel exists, it seems to stem from local conditions, such as involvement in one-stops or similar systems. The co-location appears to make referral of TANF recipients who are likely to be eligible for VR services easier. Also, co-location has meant a better means of addressing the needs of “walk-ins” with disabilities than might otherwise exist.
- Contracts, Cooperative Agreements, and Protocols -- In some States, the VR agency is unable to serve all eligible individuals with the resources available for the VR program. In those instances, an order of selection for services, serving first those individuals with the most severe disabilities, must be established. Individuals who cannot be selected immediately for services are placed on a waiting list.

For those TANF recipients whose disabilities do not meet VR eligibility criteria or an order of selection within VR, formal agreements seem to be one solution to the problem of how to ensure the provision of specialized services. These agreements allow for the formal recognition, by both TANF and VR, of the requirements of their programs, and the contracts, where they exist, allow the use of TANF funds by the VR agency to provide services for which there are insufficient VR funds.

- VR and TANF Requirements -- One of the biggest obstacles to VR and TANF cooperation, according to front-line personnel from both entities, is the time limit associated with TANF participation and the lack of any such limits in the VR program. A solution that seems to be working in some States is an agreement on the part of both programs that, once an individual is determined eligible for VR services and a vocational plan is written, the execution of that plan is considered a fulfillment of an individual’s work requirement. The average length of time that a VR client receives services is two years. Consequently, most TANF recipients receiving VR services should complete their VR plan prior to losing TANF benefits.

Abstracts

In this section, 12 programs are highlighted. These programs are examples of effective partnerships between TANF and VR. The information was gathered from the VR agencies, and several basic questions were asked of each to develop the summaries. The questions were:

- Is the relationship mandated by the Governor, State statute, etc. or is it more informal?
- How do the referrals from TANF to VR occur? Are VR counselors co-located with TANF personnel? Is there a common computer database for information-sharing, etc.?
- How do the issues of TANF time limits and VR's requirements for informed choice, etc. get resolved?

- If a TANF recipient with a disability is determined eligible for services in a State under an order of selection, is there some kind of alternative means of service delivery either through VR or TANF or in cooperation to assist that individual to meet TANF work requirements?
- Your partnership is regarded as successful. Why do you think you have achieved the success? What is the single most important factor to it?

Arkansas:

In Arkansas the relationship between VR and TANF is contractual (VR is the contractor) and covers the process of referral, evaluation and possible VR services for TANF recipients. Those TANF recipients who, based on a disability or medical condition have received a deferral from the work requirements of Welfare-to-Work, and those recipients applying for deferrals based on disability or medical condition, are referred to VR for evaluation and possible services.

The local County TANF case manager is responsible for making referrals to VR. VR and TANF personnel are not presently co-located. VR counselors are responsible for visiting TANF offices on an established itinerant basis. VR and TANF are working to establish an agreed-upon computer database of information and commonly agreed upon referral, reporting, and billing criteria.

The language in the contractual agreement addresses such issues as TANF time limits and VR requirements for informed choice. The language of the contract states that when a customer has been determined eligible for rehabilitation services and either refuses to participate or declines to complete a rehabilitation plan without sufficient reason, a copy of the case closure documents are to be forwarded to TANF. Such information substantiates decisions for TANF to impose sanctions. This policy is to be clearly conveyed to each TANF recipient referral.

At this time, the VR agency is under an order of selection that limits the agency's ability to provide services to clients whose disabilities are not significant. The TANF contract provides additional resources to VR that will allow for services to be provided to a significant number of new clients.

Colorado:

Before the TANF law was passed in Colorado, Colorado VR and the Denver Department of Social Services began to develop a pilot project to help meet the employment needs of TANF recipients. VR and Denver TANF staff agreed that a number of clients on TANF were people with disabilities. Both VR and Denver TANF began discussions to initiate a pilot project to coordinate efforts.

The VR counselor brings expertise about disability-related employment issues and services to the project. The social services caseworker brings expertise about the TANF program and childcare services to the project. Through the pilot project, the social services caseworker is educated about the VR program, and the VR counselor is educated about TANF. With this information, a TANF caseworker knows which clients to refer to VR. This simplifies collaboration and coordination among

the TANF caseworker, the VR counselor, and the TANF recipient to ensure progress toward the same goal. This coordination simplifies sharing information and coordinating employment goals, avoids duplication, and allows for special services when necessary.

VR expanded the concept to seven other Colorado counties -- three are in the Denver metropolitan area (Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas), El Paso (includes Colorado Springs), La Plata, Mesa, and Pueblo Counties. Those TANF agencies contribute 21.3% of the VR counselor's salary and almost all of the diagnostic and training costs for the jointly served clients. As a result of these projects, it is expected that 290 TANF clients with disabilities will become employed in 2001, 711 in 2002, and 1,103 during the third year of the project.

Connecticut:

For the past two years, Connecticut's Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) has been collaborating with the State's Department of Labor (DOL), Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Social Services Division of Family Services. They formed a "Hard to Serve Committee," the purposes of which are:

1. To disseminate information and technical assistance to facilitate the screening of program applicants with possible learning disabilities;
2. To work with health maintenance organizations that serve Medicaid clients with mental illness and/or substance abuse issues; and
3. To work with each other on referrals/ process and cross training for a case management system (which has been contracted by DOL).

Kansas:

Kansas is one of the States in which TANF and VR organizationally reside under the same umbrella agency. There is some co-location of services, particularly on the local level, and Statewide, there is a strong knowledge of cross-programmatic requirements. Through the one-stop systems, some VR and TANF offices share intake and assessment functions.

Kansas has addressed the TANF time limit and its conflict with the more flexible nature of VR services. The TANF office counts most activities called for in individuals' written plans with VR as job skills training for the purposes of meeting the TANF work requirement. That cooperation and understanding solves one of the more contentious issues facing these partnerships.

Maine:

In the State of Maine, the relationship between VR and TANF is informal. TANF operates through the Career Centers (One-Stop Centers). VR counselors are presently co-located in Career Centers throughout Maine.

If a TANF recipient with a disability is already eligible for services, the VR counselor works with the consumer and the TANF representative, and the consumer receives services with TANF funds that are contracted out to rehabilitation service providers who provide intensive services to consumers. VR does not pay for these services. If the TANF recipient is not eligible for VR services, there is no VR involvement in the case, but the individual receives services from the contracted community rehabilitation providers.

New Hampshire:

The relationship in New Hampshire between the VR agency and TANF is an informal one. The TANF service delivery system is based on an interagency model that includes staff from Employment Security, and prior to the implementation of WIA, a staff person from the Job Training Program. These teams were housed in the local Employment Security Office. Each VR regional office assigned a specific counselor to receive referrals and to report back and forth to a counterpart in TANF. The VR counselor was considered an “ad hoc” member of the interagency team but was not co-located. Since the implementation of WIA, VR counselors are located in each of the thirteen one-stop centers on either a full or part time basis. As liaisons with the TANF team, these counselors accept referrals, serve these mutual customers or expedite referrals to the local regional office.

Disagreements that initially occurred were attributed to a mutual lack of understanding regarding the eligibility and service provisions of both partner agencies. This has been resolved through joint training and enhanced communication. Front line staff is encouraged to meet during plan development and to resolve potential conflicts relative to time constraints and informed choice. Disagreements that cannot be resolved with the VR Regional Leader are referred to a designated person in Central Office who functions as a State liaison and works to resolve issues with a counterpart in TANF. At VR the State liaison also notes patterns or trends and will recommend training and strategies to address these issues.

New Hampshire believes that the partnership is successful because good communication takes place between the individuals doing the work and a shared commitment to focus on the needs of mutual customers.

Oregon:

VR and TANF reside under the same umbrella State government entity, facilitating a strong relationship, but one that is more informal than contracts or other mandates. Referrals are made at the staff level, with some VR offices co-located with TANF. In addition, VR has out-stationed staff in the State’s Employment Department and other partner offices. TANF and VR can generate computer lists of mutual clients.

TANF clients who are mutual VR clients with a VR plan are exempted from the TANF time limits. In addition, Oregon's TANF agency has tapped private nonprofit contractors (e.g., Goodwill Industries), which have a history of working with individuals with disabilities. This should facilitate effective service provision for those individuals with less severe disabilities who might not be able to receive services under an order of selection and prevent a "deluge" of VR referrals from TANF.

Rhode Island:

With both its Office of Rehabilitation Services and Family Independence (TANF) program under the leadership of the Department of Human Services, Rhode Island's VR and TANF programs have, through their "Learning Disabilities Project," committed themselves to a more seamless system of referral and service provision. The project developed a screening and assessment tool. Once an assessment of those in the general TANF population is complete, individuals with learning disabilities are referred to the project and to VR for application, assessment, and eligibility determination.

Individuals found VR-eligible then receive learning disabilities-specific and coordinated vocational evaluation/counseling, life/social skills training, literacy, and other VR services designed to meet specific needs of individuals with learning disabilities. Post-employment services are also part of the project, when needed. Those TANF recipients determined ineligible for VR return to their TANF caseworker.

Utah:

In Utah, the VR program is administered by the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR) and TANF is located in the Department of Workforce Services (DWS), which also houses other workforce-related services. Even though the VR and public assistance programs are located in different government departments, USOR considers the relationship it has with DWS' programs to be very positive. The VR program has had cooperative arrangements with Job Services since the late 1970s and working relationships in the past with other programs providing services to welfare recipients (food stamps, AFDC, etc.). Under TANF, those prior arrangements have expanded to encompass a broader scope of TANF-related programs that are under the DWS umbrella.

Utah's VR, TANF, and other welfare and workforce-related programs use a common referral form and information technology that allows information sharing between programs. In addition, the VR program is either physically located or electronically linked to DWS offices statewide and, under an RSA grant called "Choose to Work Utah," individualized job development and placement services are provided to individuals with disabilities.

USOR has a long history of developing cooperative arrangements with TANF and other public assistance programs. USOR attributes this experience to TANF's success in the State.

Vermont:

Vermont has always had a cooperative relationship with both the Department of Employment and Training (DET) and the Division of Prevention, Assistance, Transition and Health Access (PATH, formally Division of Social Welfare). This cooperation has led to a pilot program, funded by Federal Welfare to Work funds, in which VR counselors are partnered with DET case managers to serve individuals with long-term welfare dependence. VR provides screening and assessment, disability accommodations, job site analysis and other vocational supports. The DET case manager assists with employer contacts and contributes a vast knowledge of employment services. A job coach provides intensive community support to both employees and employers.

The pilot program was very successful in identifying hidden disabilities and providing post-employment supports to keep people working. VR will now be shifting to a statewide partnership directly with PATH, and funded by them, to serve individuals who have been medically exempted from work requirements and who have multiple barriers to employment. Also, individuals applying for welfare will be screened for a possible disability and referred to VR for services. Working with VR on an employment plan counts as a work activity for welfare participants.

Some of the VR counselors are co-located within DET/one-stop centers. VR counselors will be linked to the PATH computer system and will be trained as PATH workers, thereby becoming the primary welfare case manager while the participant is actively working with VR. Referrals will come directly from PATH.

The success of these partnerships has come from the melding of expertise and the willingness of all partners to work together to serve the clientele. VR's experience with the welfare populations suggests that a large majority of individuals within the welfare system have disabilities that have not been identified or accommodated. By addressing the unique needs of welfare constituents and providing intensive support to overcome barriers, successful transition to work has been accomplished.

Washington:

A voluntary relationship between Washington VR and TANF exists; however, because of the way the two programs are structured within the same umbrella agency of State government, coordination is required. A written inter-divisional protocol for referral and coordination of services has been developed and adopted by the two agencies. Both agencies have agreed that referrals to VR will be "managed" to ensure that the agency is not deluged with TANF referrals.

While some VR and TANF offices are co-located on the local and regional levels, staff believes that this is not necessarily the key element for success. Instead, the quality of the relationships among key players at the local level, trust, cooperation, and communication, are most important. A database is under development that would allow VR and TANF to identify common clients.

The draft protocol specifies that referral from TANF to VR will be voluntary, based on the wishes of the client, not a mandate from a case manager. Once VR eligibility is established, it has been agreed by both

agencies that elements of informed choice shall prevail in development of a plan of service and that a VR rehabilitation plan shall also serve as an individual's TANF work plan.

Native American/Tribal Programs:

For most programs, welfare reform has meant an increase in applications for service, and for some programs, it necessitated going into an order of selection in which only persons with the most significant disabilities can be served. It also necessitated the American Indian Rehabilitation (AIR) agencies to widen their circle of supports and first-dollar resources to include services available through TANF, Native Employment Works, and Welfare-to-Work.

For some programs, welfare reform has allowed coordination of services in a one-stop office permitting shared services for reception, job placement, general assistance, cash assistance/welfare, low income housing energy assistance, low-income food distribution programs, food stamps, Medicaid, and child care.

For tribes with VR programs, this collaboration may defer the need for entering into an order of selection status because of the sharing of support services and resources.

Welfare reform has also challenged the AIR staff to be more vigilant in their advocacy for persons with disabilities, by providing guidance, education, and technical assistance to colleagues, since often it is only the VR counselors and AIR staff that have the knowledge and the skills to identify and work with persons with disabilities.

Conclusion:

As has been demonstrated by the examples above, there are some partnerships between TANF and VR that are already in place, and while it may be, in some States, a little early to evaluate them completely, early indications are that they are working. Issues such as TANF's time limits, VR's eligibility requirements, and other programmatic limitations have presented challenges to the agencies, but some have found ways to confront them.

Welfare reform is still relatively new, and over time, we anticipate having more examples of effective partnering to share. We will continue to disseminate new information as it becomes available. In the interim, if you would like to discuss any of these partnerships in greater detail, please contact Jenn Rigger, VR Program Specialist, at 202-260-2179 or via e-mail at jenn_rigger@ed.gov.