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OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
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INFORMATION MEMORANDUM
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TO: STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES
STATE REHABILITATION COUNCILS
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

SUBJECT: This Information Memorandum provides state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies with research highlights from the *An Assessment of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies*.

CONTENT: The Study Group Inc. and its partners—The Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, and the Colorado Center for School and Work for Special Populations, Colorado State University—initiated An Assessment of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies under contract to the U. S. Department of Education. The purpose of the assessment was to provide a descriptive national picture of current transition policies and practices among state VR agencies and to identify policy issues and effective practices in the provision of transition services.

The study was conducted in four phases. Phase one consisted of interviews with federal officials and a review and analysis of the literature on transition services and outcomes, the RSA Case Service Report (RSA-911) data, RSA monitoring reports, and VR state plans. These preliminary activities were designed to inform subsequent project actions by identifying policy and program issues and indicators of effective practices for further investigation.

Phase two was the development and administration of a structured National Survey to collect standardized descriptive information on transition policies and practices from all 80 state VR agencies; it also allowed states to self-nominate any unique and innovative practices. The survey, detailed in the study's Interim Report (November 2006), was designed to answer questions that could not readily be answered through a review of the extant data and thus was focused on obtaining new information on state VR agency policies and practices.

Phase three of the study was the investigation of promising practices that facilitate improved VR services and outcomes for transition-aged youths

within three state VR agencies. The identification and investigation of promising practices were based on earlier study activities and the results of the survey. Three state VR agencies—Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation—were selected for site visits by the study team. The purpose of each site visit was to investigate effective policies, practices, strategies, and fiscal and administrative management considerations that promote collaboration and improve transition services for youths with disabilities.

The final phase of the study was the development of the final report, *An Assessment of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies*. This summary briefly reviews the study findings and overall conclusions and policy recommendations.

Study Findings

This section summarizes the findings of the *National Survey* and the investigation of promising practices in three state VR agencies.

The National Survey

Survey recipients were 80 VR agencies, including 24 agencies in states where services for persons with blindness are separate from the general agency. A total of 72 surveys were returned for a 90 percent response rate. The survey instrument was organized into five major domains: (1) state and local interagency agreements; (2) identification, referral, and application; (3) role of VR personnel; (4) transition services; and (5) resources and funding.

The following is a summary of the most effective transition policies and practices identified by survey respondents within the five domains.

- Local interagency agreements are established with individual school districts within the state.
- Local VR agencies work with local educational agencies (LEAs) to identify barriers within each organization that may impede the local delivery of transition services.
- Local interagency agreements identify the specific roles to be played by the VR agency and LEA personnel.
- The VR agency and LEAs work together to develop procedures for outreach to, and identification of, transition-aged youths who are of school age but not currently under an individualized education program (IEP)—those who have a 504 plan, who receive no special education services, or who have dropped out of school.

- Local school personnel have available printed materials (such as brochures or guidebooks), produced by the VR agency, that detail referral and application information.
- School records and assessment information are used by the VR agency in making eligibility determinations.
- VR agency personnel actively participate in the transition planning meetings of eligible transition-aged youths.
- VR agency personnel provide follow-up to students after high school completion to assist eligible transition-aged youths in connecting with postsecondary education, employment, and independent living opportunities.
- VR agency personnel work collaboratively with LEAs to identify opportunities for transition-aged youths in work-based training situations, through vocational courses or community-based work experiences.
- An IEP/transition plan and individualized plan for employment (IPE) are coordinated for an eligible transition-aged youth before the student completes high school.
- VR agency personnel provide career counseling and guidance services to eligible transition-aged youths who are still attending high school.
- VR agency personnel actively build rapport and personally encourage eligible transition-aged youths in their efforts at school and in work experience activities.
- The state or local VR agency and LEAs share the cost of transition services, such as assessment, community-based work experiences, and job coaching, for eligible transition-aged youths while they are still in school.
- The state has a mechanism for tracking the funds expended on transition-aged youths.
- Third-party agreements are used by the VR agency and LEAs to support the planning and delivery of transition services to transition-aged youths.

Promising Practices Investigated through State VR Agency Site Visits

The State Agencies

Study team members conducted site visits in three state VR agencies (Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation) exhibiting promising practices in the delivery of transition services to youths with disabilities. Each site visit was conducted in three

days with significant portions of each visit devoted to group interviews with policymakers, administrators, service providers, consumers, and parents. The interviews focused on specific promising practices that were identified in the site selection process. The study team also identified a variety of critical activities, relationships, and commitments that enabled and sustained important collaborative, coordinated transition activities. While the three agencies differed on a number of aspects (e.g., staffing patterns, individuals served, expenditures) the site visits revealed a number of similarities in support of promising practices:

- A long-standing commitment to collaboration as a mechanism for improving programs for transition-aged youths;
- Strong state leadership and guidance;
- A framework for collaboration through state and local interagency agreements and through clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
- Program monitoring and evaluation;
- Professional development and technical assistance; and
- Innovative approaches to problem solving and program development within each state.

Promising Practices

Reviewed promising practices represented collaborative, innovative responses to expanding transition services. To a great extent, these approaches were designed out of necessity to create a transition continuum that provided the best of what is known in transition planning, implementation, and improved post-school outcomes. They were also designed to address specific barriers and conditions within each state.

In Alabama and Colorado, there was a focus on transition positions jointly funded by VR and education through cooperative agreements with LEAs or other third-party entities. The Study Group also reviewed Alabama's College Prep Program and Colorado's participation in a five-year U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy grant. The Vermont site visit focused on the impact of the School-to-Work Transition Project as illustrated in five unique local collaborative initiatives.

Overall Conclusions

This section presents a summary of the overall conclusions regarding the transition-aged population and state VR agency structures, perceptions, policies, and practices as they relate to transition services. Strategies for consideration are presented as well.

Transition-Aged Youths

The number of transition-aged youths served by VR varies across state agencies. Within some state agencies, these youths represent a significant proportion of the VR population receiving services. The extent to which these youths are receiving collaborative transition services from VR and education or are receiving VR services while they are still in school is not clear. National data do not differentiate between transition-aged youths who are in school and those who have dropped out or exited. Schools are a primary and important source of referrals for youths to VR agencies, and that a majority of all youths referred to VR had an IEP while in school. Little evidence was found to support the identification and referral of transition-aged youths who do not have an IEP, such as those on a 504 plan.

State VR Agencies

The variations in state VR agency organizational location and structure, size, available resources, and number of clients served are striking, even among the three agencies that participated in the site visits. There appear to be two organizational characteristics, however, that consistently support and promote transition programs—visible and articulate state leadership, and strategic assignment of VR personnel. Consistent evidence was found regarding the importance of state leadership at the policy level and the value of state level transition staff with the primary responsibility of coordinating transition efforts. Equally important was the assignment of VR counselors and other personnel to work in support of collaborative transition programs at the local school and community levels. Throughout the site visits, consumers, parents, and school personnel confirmed the significance of the presence, availability, and support of VR personnel in all areas addressed by this study. VR agencies value state and, to a lesser extent, local interagency agreements as tools to support the delivery of quality transition services. The site visits confirmed that the utility of interagency agreements increases in proportion to the specificity of the agreement, the infrastructure(s) created, and the degree to which the implementation of the agreement is monitored.

Identification, Referral, and Application

The communication among VR personnel, school personnel, transition-aged youths, and parents is critical to the appropriate identification, referral, and subsequent applications of VR-eligible youths. Availability of information about VR and visibility of VR personnel in schools and the community are key factors in establishing and maintaining such communication.

Role of VR Personnel

VR personnel are focused on participating in transition planning for eligible youths while they are in school and providing VR services once the students exit school. A lack of resources inhibits greater VR participation in schools and limits access to professional development activities focused on transition-aged youths. However, the agencies that The Study Group visited demonstrated that VR can take a more active, collaborative role while students are still in school through cooperative funding arrangements and the

development of state and local cooperative planning and service delivery efforts.

Transition Services

While the most frequently provided VR services to transition-aged youths with disabilities occur near or shortly after school exit, VR agencies value early engagement with eligible youths and coordinated IEP/IPE planning. Moreover, there are examples of agencies, such as those participating in the site visits, which provide eligible students with community-based vocational assessment, training, and paid work experiences while they are in school.

Resources and Funding

The variance in expenditures and average costs associated with VR services across state agencies, including the agencies that The Study Group visited, makes resource and funding comparisons difficult. The majority of agencies believe that current funding levels are insufficient to fully support required transition activities. Even so, few agencies use cost-shared positions with educational agencies to expand transition services. Alabama and Colorado, however, demonstrated that jointly-funded positions can and do benefit participating VR and education agencies, as well as transition-aged youths and their families. Similarly, Vermont used cooperative planning and service delivery with multiple partners to expand its available transition resources.

Promising Practices

A number of state VR agencies are engaged in promising practices that support transition-aged youths and their families. These practices are based on the varied needs and circumstances of the agencies involved. Many are focused on allowing youths with disabilities access to community-based vocational assessment, training, and work experiences known to enhance post-school outcomes. Through fiscal and programmatic collaboration, VR, education, and related agencies are able to provide transition experiences for youths that would not be available from any single agency. The Study Group was fortunate to visit three agencies with a long history of commitment to transition programs and clearly defined practices that promote them. The Study Group was confident that a number of agencies could have provided an equally valuable experience.

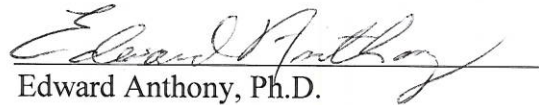
Strategies

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it may be helpful for agencies to consider the following strategies when seeking to improve programs and outcomes for transition-age consumers:

- Promote state and local interagency agreements as a strategy for enhancing the collaboration between VR and special education programs in supporting the transition of youths with disabilities.
- Strengthen state and local interagency collaboration.

- Strengthen information, identification, and referral procedures.
- Strengthen pre-service and continuing education programs for VR personnel.
- Establish more comprehensive and integrated state data systems between VR and education systems.
- Support the collection and systematic use of post-school follow-up information in planning and policy development.

More information regarding these strategies, along with the complete survey and site visit results, may be found at www.vrtransitionstudy.org. If you have any questions concerning this Information Memorandum, please contact Dr. Hugh Berry, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Rehabilitation Services Administration at 202-245-7272.



Edward Anthony, Ph.D.
Delegated the Authority to Perform the
Functions of Commissioner for the
Rehabilitation Services Administration

cc: Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)
National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB)