**Emerging Practice**

**Date: 2/3/17**

**Title: Illinois Steps to Effective Core Partner Leadership in Business Engagement**

**Highlights:**

The Illinois Rehabilitation agency has established a strategy to increase employment outcomes for people with disabilities by:

1. Implementing a statewide strategy to increase the competency of VR staff to meet business sector needs, and
2. Enhance the business outcomes in the relationship through their leadership in developing and participating in collaborative business engagement within the AJC business team functions and in partnership with Regional Economic Development activities.

**Description:** The Illinois Division of Rehabilitation worked with Core Partners to develop collaborative strategies in engaging business through a grant with the DOL in 2016. This effort coincides with their internal effort to increase the competency of staff with regard to the “dual customer” approach (job seeker and business). The agency sees this as a work in progress as newly trained staff are developing connections with business service teams in workforce areas.

The increased emphasis in this area has had two elements:

1. Increase the competency within VR staff to respond to business needs.
2. Engage with core and required WIOA partners to serve targeted business sectors together.

Addressing Internal Staff Competency:

In consultation with the JDVRTAC, Illinois leadership established a long-term objective to expand the competency and comfort in Counselors with business engagement as a function of their jobs. The target is to have 15% to 30% of each of these positions effectively directed to meeting business needs. John Marchioro directed the training with support from the JDVRTAC team. The first group that received the training was representative of all regions, with the expectation to complete the training with all counselors, in cohorts, over time. The agency established a statewide target in terms of new business engagements (20) along with a goal of how many individuals would work in those new business relationships (50), as a means to quantify impact of this effort.

The staff selected for the first round of training was selected with the deliberate intent to reflect diverse expertise with different types of disabilities. The initial phase began with webinar training for the supervisors of the staff selected, for the purpose of their understanding and support to this investment in their staff. This was followed by webinar training with staff, and then a meeting in Springfield, face to face with all Supervisors and selected staff. The training was facilitated by John Marchioro of the Illinois Division of Rehabilitation Services, and Jeanne Miller and her colleagues with the JDVRTAC.

Implementation is still fairly early and has not moved to the next cohort yet, but the agency believes that it is able to evaluate the progress to a certain degree. As with many investments of this type, there was experience with misperceptions of the pilots and evaluation in some regions. The stages of webinars and then the face-to-face meetings, and ongoing follow-up by the state lead allowed the misperception to be recognized and addressed. It is important for the regions to recognize the business engagement process as not an issue of racking up tick marks of employer contacts. The emphasis is on establishing a “listening” relationship, first, with the business customers, so that their needs, interests, and challenges are understood first, before any consideration is made regarding “placements.” As this information is developed, it is able to be shared with other Departments.

Leadership in Collaborative Business Engagement:

The state lead for VR’s business engagement efforts, John Marchioro, recognizes that the task in developing the necessary employer relationships is overwhelming for the staff that they have invested with the pilot training: “This is why you should not be trying to do this alone. You should be working with your workforce partners to establish the business relationships. Our experience is that these folks want to work with us, and we recognize that they don’t have a model for working with us. Our outreach has been helpful in creating those operational models for all of us.”

As a part of the implementation in the pilot noted above, regional meetings were held for the purpose of identifying business engagement conditions and strategies for each region -- through two-day sessions. Workforce and other partner staff were included in these sessions. People from Illinois Worknet and other partners talked about what they do, and there was facilitated discussion on how the partners can work together to meet the needs of the local business sectors.

After these meetings, in each of the regions, the counselors selected in the pilots became a part of the regional AJC business service team. The Illinois VR agency has business relationships with the Economic Development agencies in all regions of the state as well, and these counselors have become members of those teams, too.

**Evaluation and Potential Impact:**

Increasing capacity within and without is an even-handed approach to address an important "dual customer” approach as Illinois’ VR agency sees it. As in other states, WIOA implementation is in early stages, but the investment of resources and expertise of the agency toward its vision of customer service from the business customer standpoint is based upon lessons learned over the years leading up to today.

The establishment of a common career pathway system in each region is enhanced when the strategy to respond to the needs of the business sectors are also collaborative. The Illinois VR agency recognizes this in their strategy and partnership. It will be important to watch their progress in meeting the initial targets they have set for themselves through this activity and how new objectives are recalibrated.

**For More Information:**



John Marchioro, (217) 782-2280

Division of Rehabilitation Services

John.marchioro@illinois.gov