**Emerging Practice**

**Date: 8/17/17**

**Title: Montana Collaborative Business Engagement**

**Highlights:**

The Montana VR agency is taking the following steps toward increasing collaborative business engagement:

1. Increasing the business service expertise among agency staff
2. Developing shared business activities with workforce partners, including:
	1. Joining in meeting with regional Job Service Employer Councils
	2. Sharing business service information
	3. Providing support to area businesses including the provision of Windmills training to interested companies

**Description:**

The Montana Vocational Rehabilitation Agency recognized that an increase in the business engagement skills of the counseling staff is necessary in order for the agency to have a positive impact in businesses meeting their objectives through the successful employment of qualified applicants with disabilities. For this purpose, the Montana agency established an intensive technical assistance plan with the JDVRTAC. The focus of the plan with JDVRTAC has been to develop training and resource materials for staff to increase their ability to respond directly to the needs of business customers, then to expand their ability to use available Labor Market Information to support informed choices among their job seeking clients.

Chanda Hermanson-Dudley, Montana’s Chief of Field Services, facilitates meetings once a month with business services team staff, focusing on building their business engagement skills and monitoring their time commitment toward business services. These staff are trained to provide Windmills Training to business customers as a contribution from the agency to the collaborative business services.

Each business specialist is expected to contact two businesses a month and to share what they are learning during these meetings. These contacts are in addition to the participation in SHRM, Chamber and Job Service Employer Council (JSEC) Meetings. JSEC groups are established in each workforce region and facilitated by the workforce partners. These groups generally include 15 to 20 local businesses who gather to gain information on employment issues and supports that the AJC partners can address in supporting businesses in meeting their objectives. The JSEC connections have supported the VR agency’s leadership in the partnership to address topics that include presentations during the National Disability Employment Awareness Month and facilitate related discussion among the participating businesses.

Agenda in these monthly meetings support the ongoing development of core competencies for business service foundations. Mark Mahnke worked with Laurie Ford from JDVRTAC to develop learning modules which focus on:

* Basics of ADA
* Accommodations
* Tax Credits
* Language in talking with employers

The collaborative partner business engagement strategies began with the JSEC meetings. VR offices are not co-located in Montana, but the agencies are piloting an initiative with one of the offices to have one of the VR staff work in the AJC with the business specialists and explore how this can work. At this point, the response from the workforce partners is positive, and the agencies are in discussion about whether this can or should be replicated in other areas of the state.

The use of Windmills training with businesses is at an early stage, but is collaborative in nature. Montana has created a Community of Practice with trainers across partner agencies that include members of the business teams in AJCs to support them in providing the Windmills training to businesses. The number of businesses that have received this training is increasing, and feedback is positive.

The VR agency Business Team is contributing to the available business customer information database. The electronic labor exchange system in Montana is known as MWorks, and the agency is adding its own information on business needs and contacts to the information that the workforce business specialists are contributing. The VR staff are updating the business information that is out of date in the system. In addition to the contribution that the VR partner makes, it also increases the level of information available to the VR staff on activity with businesses. Staff recognize who has the contact with each business in the system for follow-up activity.

At this point in time, there is possible reorganization at the state level which will likely impact the design of business service alignment and integration in Montana. It remains to be determined what changes might mean for the above activities.

**Evaluation and Potential Impact:**

While there are several strategies in Montana with the VR and Workforce agencies to explore the benefits of meeting the needs of business sectors together, there is not yet a vision for what collaborative business engagement will look like. This is in an exploratory phase, and together, the agencies evaluate to benefits and impact of each strategy mentioned in this overview. It’s an expectation, that ultimately, individuals with disabilities may have greater access to more diverse employment opportunities through collaborative business approaches.

Since the engagement of the collaborative business activity, the Montana VR Agency has moved into an “Order of Selection,” and it has been difficult to fully evaluate impact of these practices on business service outcomes.

**For More Information:**

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