**Emerging Practice**

**Date: 8/14/17**

**Title: New Hampshire Collaborative Business Activity**

**Highlights:**

To balance their investment in the development of business engagement competencies within direct service staff, New Hampshire’s Vocational Rehabilitation Agency worked collaboratively with the following strategies collaboratively to increase the employment of people with disabilities:

1. Establishment of a Business Awards program
2. Development of Workforce Collaborations regionally focused around the state
3. Increased use of Job Fairs and Partnership with HR Associations

**Description:**

New Hampshire’s Vocational Rehabilitation agency began in 2005 to increase their investment into specialized positions that focused on business engagement, in order to increase placement outcomes for individuals with disabilities. At the same time, they recognized the importance of increasing the competencies of direct service staff in regard to business engagement. This reflects their recognition of the importance of the coordination of the counselors with the Business Resource consultants in responding effectively and efficiently to the business needs in order to maximize placement opportunity for job seekers. At the same time, in the vision of WIOA, this agency is matching resources and expertise of their AJC partners to increase their responsivity to business customers.

Internally, the agency has invested in ACRE training and Certified Employment Support Professional Credential. These professional trainings and credentials help to enhance the skills of their professional staff who serve the job seekers with disabilities. These certifications (ACRE and Certified Employment Support Professional) represent an opportunity to staff for professional growth. Concurrently, the agency has worked with the staff of the JDVRTAC to rewrite the job descriptions and strengthen the role of the Business Resource Consultants. There are currently three of these positions, but long-term plans are in place to increase up to six of these positions that will respond to business needs statewide. With this internal investment, the agency has invested in three primary strategies to build and support a collaborative response to business customers.

Business Awards

New Hampshire state agency partners worked through the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) to establish the Employment Leadership Awards that are given each year to businesses that are leaders in successful engagement of qualified workers with disabilities. Winners of the award are feted at events, and publicized statewide. This is a means to promote business partners in their leadership as well as build awareness of the benefits for everyone when people with people with disabilities are employed. One of the activities currently with the Workforce Coalitions is to establish regional Employment Leadership Awards. This September will be the ninth year in offering the awards (2017). This year, over 20 businesses have been nominated, and five will be recognized.

Workforce Coalitions

With the development of the business awards, agencies began coming together in communities to establish coalitions to work together to increase their joint success in job placement of individuals with disabilities. This practice of “like-minded” individuals shared information and developed joint strategies for business engagement. At the outset, there was state level funding to support the coalition activity. When the funding diminished, the VR agency stepped up to continue support and made it possible to continue four of the nine coalitions. The idea of expanding again to more coalitions is still on the drawing board. The core coalitions are in Manchester, Concord, Sea Coast, Keene and the Lakes Region, and in development in Nashua.

This spirit is expanding into the AJC’s within the vision of WIOA. Within the local partnership, agencies have been meeting to learn more about each other. This supports their shared ability to make warm introductions of partner expertise to business customers, as it helps to meet the needs of the business.

The Workforce Coalition activity is being expanded to include the Community Rehabilitation Programs also engaged with services with the Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. This activity is being completed with a face-to-face training and orientation on WIOA and follow-up with regularly scheduled conference calls that began in the summer of 2017.

Job Fairs and Human Resource Organizations

Until fairly recently, Job Fairs were held by organizations who charged a significant fee to businesses. Thinking originally to develop a Job Fair specifically focused on engaging job seekers with disabilities, the VR agency engaged their workforce partner agencies to conduct a large job fair that they supported together. This Fair included 76 businesses and 500 job seekers. Recognizing the strong impact, the state has taken over the Job Fair activity and is doing a great job. The Core Partner agencies continue to support the participation of the job seekers they are working with in regard to participation in the Job Fairs.

The New Hampshire VR Agency has been cultivating relationships with the state’s HR agencies, and has participated in the Granite State HR Conference for over 7 years. In the past two years, these agencies recognize the expertise of the VR agency as an asset to them. The VR agency is now listed as among the resources for member agencies to consult with in regard to addresses their challenges as employers.

**Evaluation and Potential Impact:**

The New Hampshire Workforce Partner agencies each approach the business community as separate agencies, but have developed an operational understanding of the expertise within each agency. This allows each partner agency to be engaged through introductions with the business customers as needed. The effort to build recognition and awareness through the awards, and professional affiliation and problem solving through the workforce coalitions is a foundation now, and agencies continue to work toward sustainability.

This effort is extended to the AJC partnership in operation in workforce regions and can contribute to the collaborative engagement in the developing Career Pathway models in New Hampshire regions. This is an area where the NH VR agency as a core partner in the system is providing leadership. Watching how these strategies translate to the effective inclusion of people with disabilities in the New Hampshire Career Pathway model will be interesting.

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