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MEETING THE NEEDS OF TRANSITION- AGE YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: CORE COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Editor's Note: In a prior CRP Brief (Vol. 2, No. 3), the potential for Community Rehabilitation Providers to become an important link for transitioning students with disabilities from school to work was detailed. This CRP Brief focuses on the competencies needed to provide youth with disabilities adequate services, a topic gaining much needed attention. Extensive research has been done and a set of "Core Competencies" has emerged that should be of considerable help in enhancing services to this population. We are pleased to bring you this current information from the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Institute for Educational Leadership, written for this edition of the CRP Brief. Our thanks to Curtis Richards and Joan Wills.

BACKGROUND

Adolescence and young adulthood is a time of transition from the structured and protective environments of home and school to the unstructured, "fend for yourself" world of work and adult living. An awkward period in any young person's life, transition is often about moving from total dependence to self-sufficiency. The challenges facing youth who are disconnected from education systems and employment are expansive. An estimated 5.4 million youth between the ages of 16-24 are out of school and out of work according to studies by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

Self-sufficiency is a goal expected of any young person growing into adulthood in this country. Unfortunately, these expectations typically have not been equally applied to youth with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities. However, these young people can make significant progress toward this goal if they are given the opportunity to learn, develop, and practice the incumbent skills.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) articulates a national framework of public policy on disability. A piece of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination based on disability, this act "requires" that institutions provide people with disabilities the necessary tools for making informed choices and decisions; for achieving equality of opportunity, full inclusion, and integration into all aspects of society, including employment and

independent living, and for economic and social self sufficiency.

Work is the cornerstone of self-sufficiency. However, by now it is well-known that becoming successful in the workforce remains illusive for many youth with disabilities. The facts make this all too clear:

Special education students are more than twice as likely as their peers in general education to drop out of high school.

Youth with disabilities are half as likely as their peers without disabilities to participate in post-secondary education.

Current special education students can expect to face much higher adult unemployment rates than their peers without disabilities.

The adjudication rate of youth with disabilities is four times higher than for youth without disabilities.

The pregnancy rate for youth with disabilities is much higher than the national average; among females with learning disabilities, for example, 50 percent will be pregnant within three years of school exit.

Young adults with disabilities are three times more likely to live in poverty as adults than their peers without disabilities.

The picture is even more grim for youth with significant disabilities: less than one out of ten will attain integrated employment; five out of ten will experience indefinitely long waits for post-school employment services; and most of these individuals will earn less than \$2.40 per hour in sheltered workshop settings (www.ncwd-youth.info).

Extending this disheartening picture is the unemployment rate of adults with disabilities, which continues to hover around 70 percent. Hope for reversing this stubborn statistic could be found in placing focused attention on the transition needs of youth with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities.

In today's labor market, without the higher level of skills demanded by employers, opportunities for employment at a living wage, and ultimately self-sufficiency are dismal. It is important for the U.S. workforce development system to strengthen its capacity to provide effective training and preparation for young people both with and without disabilities to enable them to enter and succeed in the labor market. In order to assist the youth, staff in the programs serving them must be armed with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities so the youth are equipped to make informed choices and decisions about career goals that can lead them to economic and social self sufficiency.

THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT "SYSTEM"

A commonly agreed upon definition of what is meant by the term "workforce development system" is still evolving. This is not particularly surprising. The term was seldom used until the beginning of the 1990s, prior to the development of the Workforce Investment Act 1998 (WIA). In the broadest sense the system includes all the different institutions and services that provide emerging and current workers with the opportunities to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills necessary to be a participant in the labor force – both private and publicly funded. This represents countless institutions. The publicly funded portion of this system alone is massive: it includes all national, state, and local level organizations that plan and allocate resources (both public and private), provide administrative oversight, and operate programs in order to assist individuals and employers in obtaining education, training, job placement, and job recruitment.

The types of organizations (and array of settings) involved in workforce development are quite varied, including One-Stop Centers and youth

development programs, vocational rehabilitation programs, high schools, colleges, after-school programs, job training programs and community rehabilitation programs.

There are multiple funding streams, separate governance structures, differing eligibility rules, diverse accountability methodologies, and distinctive traditions and cultures that support various parts of this system, all posing issues that policy makers and practitioners alike must address.

It can be anticipated that recognition will continue to make a substantial distinction between services needed based on emerging entrants into the workforce – youth- and current workers-adults. Admittedly there is a moving target in terms of who is considered an adult as the transition period to independence is stretching into the twenties for many young people for multiple reasons that are not pertinent to this discussion.

YOUTH SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Who are youth service professionals? In the context of the workforce development system those engaged in the initial preparation of youth and young adults including intake workers, case managers, job developers, teachers, transition coordinators, counselors, youth development group leaders, and independent living specialists, are often the first contact or "face" of the workforce development system. They play an important role in connecting youth to workforce preparation opportunities and supports.

How each of these workers connects to the young person is an overarching issue. Research has shown the importance of caring adults in youth's lives and interactions with staff have been cited repeatedly as the reason that youth stay in or leave a program. Therefore, the ability of youth service professionals to engage and retain youth is a key piece of the workforce development system's ability to prepare young people for the transition to adulthood and the world of work.

CORE STAFF COMPETENCIES

Serving youth effectively calls for both general and specialized knowledge. Certain knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are necessary. Youth service practitioners must keep pace with constant changes in the labor market as the nation's economy shifts and new technologies evolve, as well as with the demands of more rigorous academic standards and the evolving needs and culture of today's youth.

Therefore, the range of necessary competencies must include knowledge drawn from the fields of education, workforce development, and youth development.

Success in today's workforce development system requires that all youth service professionals, including those at community rehabilitation programs, have some familiarity with the field of disability; have knowledge of adolescent development; follow appropriate youth employment and disabilities laws; communicate with, motivate, engage, accurately assess and place youth; connect to employers, communities, and families; and complete all the paperwork required in their jobs. Youth service professionals with the necessary KSAs can provide all youth with a wider variety of opportunities, resources, and services to best reach their potential and make a positive transition to adulthood and the world of work. Programs and organizations can be more effective when youth service professionals are equipped with the critical KSAs to do their jobs.

As connecting youth to the workforce development system requires a mix of competencies from the youth development, education, and workforce development fields, no one system can (or should) do it all. Cross-system collaboration is the key to providing youth with all the opportunities, supports, and services they need to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood and the world of work. In addition, as so many of the "neediest" youth are engaged in several systems at once, cross-system collaboration makes financial and administrative sense.

As part of its Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Initiative, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) has analyzed and built a framework of what professionals from across these three fields need to know to work effectively together on behalf of youth. The commonalities across the three fields were found to be substantial. The KSAs are organized into ten competency areas which were compiled from a review of over 70 initiatives from the fields of youth development, workforce development, education, and disabilities. All the initiatives reviewed identify competencies, train professionals, and/or provide certification. The ten core competency areas are:

- 1) Knowledge of the Field;
- 2) Communication with Youth;
- 3) Assessment and Individualized Planning;

- 4) Relationships to Family and Community;
- 5) Workforce Preparation;
- 6) Career Exploration;
- 7) Relationships with Employers and Between Employer and Employee;
- 8) Connection to Resources;
- 9) Program Design and Delivery; and,
- 10) Administrative Skills.

The core competencies were validated by a national group of youth professionals, program managers, and stakeholders from the field through focus groups, conference calls, meetings, and an on-line feedback relating to relevancy, proficiency, and available training. This validation process confirmed the KSAs relevancy to the daily activities of youth workforce development programs.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS ACROSS BOUNDARIES

It is well known that professional development matters. When it occurs, there is a link to increased job satisfaction and retention, more youth involvement, better practice, and improved youth outcomes. These improved youth outcomes such as more community involvement, less risky behaviors, improved academic scores, and better job retention, not only are good for youth and programs, they are good for the entire community.

Professional development of staff is not only important for youth development; it is also a smart financial investment for organizations and funders. Advertising for, selecting, and training a new employee can cost an organization three to six months of productivity and 29 – 40% of a position's salary. This does not even take into account the burden on other staff in covering the missing staff person's responsibilities when a program is short-staffed. Finally, funding spent on computers, curriculum, and program space is wasted if an effective youth worker is not there to connect youth to these resources. Just as a house is not a home - a building and supplies alone do not constitute a program. Skilled professionals are necessary to make the most of any program dollars invested. Research has shown that the professional development of staff leads to better practice with youth, improves program quality, and increases the positive outcomes of youth. Yet, how to support an expansion of professional development of transition focused

services in a cost effective, collaborative fashion is a complex jigsaw puzzle. Where to start?

As noted earlier, the workforce development system is composed of many separate but connected sub-systems, many quite large such as secondary and postsecondary education. Some parts of the system have long established pre-service education programs that are required for entry into a specialty professional world (e.g. teaching) while others lack such a luxury. One of the most substantial pre-service workforce development programs has supported the vocational rehabilitation system, buttressed by a strong In-Service Training program and the Comprehensive Professional Development system requirements in the vocational rehabilitation program. Within this commitment to professional development there has been a growing recognition in the Vocational Rehabilitation system and the rehabilitation counseling programs to address the new entrant population through the development of an increasing number of offerings for “transition services” specialties.

For most workforce and youth development programs the primary means of acquiring KSA is on the job. The on-the-job approach to acquire KSAs is increasingly being supported by a growing number of specialty credentialing organizations. For example, the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), have recognized the need for specific knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with youth and have begun to develop lists of competencies, provide training and/or grant certifications to meet these needs. NAWDP recently adopted a “Youth Service Professional Endorsement,” the first known national certification for workforce development youth service professionals and they used the framework discussed above as the base to build this specialty certification. This is an approach that can be emulated. There is value in generating connected links between and among the professional development organizations within the workforce development pillar given its “sprawling base” to push forward professional development and when needed/wanted certification programs. The purpose would be to build and maintain an effective workforce development system. To do so, we believe it is essential to establish an effective and connected professional development system for the youth service professionals. .

Much of the foundation for professional development and use of the KSAs has already been laid. There are local, state, and national training organizations that are already offering training in some of

the KSAs. State and local government agencies, as well as funders, could identify or develop trainings to fill the gaps. The KSAs can be used as a framework to organize these offerings into a cohesive professional development system for youth service practitioners, allowing them to more effectively connect all youth to the best opportunities and resources. NCWD/Youth offers a KSA Study Guide (see <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/ksa/index.html>) and will soon release a package of training modules.

SUMMARY

The diverse and complex needs of today's youth cannot be met by one family, school district, government program, or private organization acting alone. The successful transition of all youth to adulthood and a productive, independent, self-sufficient life demands coordination and collaboration across systems and across agency coordination, along with an integrated services approach to serving youth at the federal, state, and local levels. It also requires knowledgeable, well-trained youth service professionals

It is through this approach to transition the self-sufficiency goals of the ADA can come closer to being realized, the employment rate of people with disabilities can be substantially improved, and today's youth with disabilities look forward to leading positive, productive lives in their communities.

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