State Agency Promising Practice

TOPIC: Interagency Collaboration

Washington: State Agencies Working Together to Strengthen Employment

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Description

Washington is a good example of a state that helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) get competitive integrated employment (CIE).

Washington's Developmental Disabilities Community Services (DDCS) and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) have worked together for many years to support people with IDD get competitive integrated employment (CIE). Both agencies share a commitment to working together at the state and local levels to carry out the state's employment goals.

Background

Washington Developmental Disabilities Community Services (DDCS) and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) are both part of the Department of Social Health Services (DSHS). Both agencies have goals related to competitive integrated employment (CIE). In 2004, DDCS and DVR developed the Adult Working Age policy. This policy made clear that every person deserves the opportunity to work.

In 2006, Washington issued another policy about employment supports. This policy made clear that the state would put resources behind providing employment supports to adults with disabilities. Washington prioritized community employment with this policy. One goal of the policy was to discourage sheltered workshops. This was the policy that came just before Employment First legislation.

Employment First policies made it easier for states like Washington to provide training on community employment for people with IDD. Washington closed all sheltered workshops once Employment First policy began. The partnership and collaboration between DDCS and DVR have made this work possible.

Although like many states, Washington has seen an increase in the use of non-work services, this increase is mostly related to people with disabilities seeking community life engagement.

What is Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)?

When a person with IDD has a competitive integrated job, it means they have a full-time or part-time job in the community with people who don't have disabilities. It also means:

- they get paid as much as people without disabilities who have similar job duties, training, and experience
- they get similar benefits as people without disabilities who have the same job duties, training, and experience
- they get the same opportunities for promotions as people without disabilities who have the same job duties, training, and experience

Implementation

Setting Clear Expectations

DDCS and DVR have a history of communicating regularly through memos. They have experience dividing responsibilities to accomplish their shared goals. After years of sharing memos,

administrators decided to create a **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** to explain their partnership and solidify their work together.

The MOU sets clear expectations about how the agencies will work together to ensure "seamless and consistent supported employment service delivery statewide." Sections of the MOU outline the referral processes and the collaboration guidelines for the agencies. The MOU explains what each agency handles, specifying how funds from each agency support clients. It also outlines the continuum of services and supports available. An administrator spoke to the value of this MOU:

> ***For decades, we've had joint memos on expected agency practices that would result in employment for individuals with IDD. I think having a message come from both DDCS and DVR of these expectations to the field has supported us in our partnership. Used to be just memos, and then we've moved to an MOU and strive to really be clear about expectations.***

Furthermore, the MOU provides a set of shared guiding principles for the agencies. It includes outlines of each agency's terminology and definitions. The MOU demonstrates the commitment from both DDCS and DVR toward creating a collaborative environment, fostering clear communication, and outlining processes so that people served by the two agencies are successfully supported to reach their CIE goals.

Partnering Intentionally

DVR and DDCS have a strong and sustainable partnership. A DDCS administrator spoke to this, stating:

> ***The collaboration between the agencies has become enculturated. It transcends leadership changes. It was an expectation that you're going to maintain and develop relationships with VR. I think that carries us more than anything, the collaboration and the respect and taking time to understand what the other agency does and how it works.***

Staff at all levels of both agencies learn about the importance of this partnership and the value of maintaining it between the agencies. Many of the current leaders in both agencies have been in the employment field for many years and have developed long-term relationships through things like attending regular interagency meetings. For example, an administrator from DDCS holds monthly meetings with DVR's three deputy regional administrators to discuss everything from big-picture regional issues to individual cases. With support from leadership, this kind of partnership helps reinforce a culture of collaboration. One administrator from DVR shared:

> ***I think one of the things that I just want to reiterate is the monthly meetings, being mindful and putting those meetings as a priority in your schedule. Everybody gets double, triple booked, right? But do try to make sure that those collaboration meetings are a priority. Even if I go and I don't have a lot to say because I'm not the supported employment manager, but I'm there. I'm there for the conversation. I make a priority to be there. And I think that we all kind of do that as partners.***

Working with Community Partners

Another key factor in Washington's success is DDCS and DVR's shared commitment to engaging community partners, self-advocates, and county-level agencies to inform and guide the delivery of their services.

Administrators at the state level are enthusiastic to work with the community partners to move employment forward, recognizing that the collaboration between state agencies must also extend to collaboration with communities to truly drive meaningful change.

DDCS and DVR invite community partners to county-level systems meetings. An administrator described these meetings as a way of "diving into those local communities, local governments, and making sure everything's going okay."

The meetings also help assess needs and areas for improvement by asking the community partners: "Do you have connections to your DVR office? Do they have connections to you and DDCS? Are all the systems working together and showing up?"

Another administrator spoke to the value of these meetings, saying:

> ***When we are in conversation with the various government partners as well as stakeholders, we start to see themes that help us to continue to develop new content to address issues as well. So, I think it serves everyone well to be sitting in the conversations together to support the changes that are necessary.***

People with disabilities are included in this work. This really helps the partnerships succeed. People with disabilities are compensated for their time and the expertise they share in the collaborative work.

Speaking about what other states could do to achieve Washington's success, one administrator shared: "I think they will get there even faster than we did if they start with that." Another leader added:

> ***A connection to self- advocates and parent advocates and even support for those groups that comes through government funding is very different in Washington compared to other states, and I think that it is a very defining thing when you're thinking about success; that you have to have the voice of people that are receiving services and the family members that are connected to them.***

Impact

The strength of the DDCS and DVR collaboration has made Washington an innovator in employment services. Ultimately, the benefits of this collaboration have reached people with IDD. Because they work so well together, DDCS and DVR have gone on to collaboratively launch initiatives like the Working Age Adult Policy and School to Work program (see Impact Highlight).

Across Washington, agencies and partners are on the same page about prioritizing employment for to help people with disabilities.

The collaboration with community partners and modeling from leadership at DDCS and DVR has helped get everyone on the same page. As one administrator shared:

> ***Whenever we have a major goal setting or coming together of leadership in Washington State, we have - for 25 years - been able to kick off those events with DVR and DDCS and now school leadership standing in front of our groups... saying, "We are together. And this is what it means to execute [these practices] for people with disabilities in Washington State."***

Impact Highlight: Washington's School-to-Work Initiative

The DDCS and DVR have used braided funds to develop a phased, individualized transition process. This process takes students with IDD from exploring their skills and interests to getting jobs as they complete school. The School-to-Work initiative, supported by SB-5790, began with local funding in King County 20 years ago. Now, this statewide effort creates a seamless transition from school into a job for students with IDD. The initiative exemplifies the impact of collaboration efforts in the state:

- **Clear expectations.** A feature of the School-to-Work program is the DDCS and DVR's data-sharing agreement, which dates back to 2008 and now allows each agency to share data with the other.
- **Intentional partnership.** The strong partnership between DDCS and DVR ensures common, consistent features of each county's transition process. This partnership also led to the creation of a shared transition map, which is the "first collaborative maps in Washington State."
- **Culture of collaboration.** DDCS and DVR administrators have regular planning meetings and attend county and regional meetings with case managers and other community partners to ensure that students have access to these transition services. County and state-level administrators have both helped create the School-to-Work initiative. The initiative reflects the population, geography, and other unique aspects of each county.
- **Partnerships in the community.** The transition program also consistently emphasizes the involvement of community partners at all levels in the students' transition. When the services overlap, there is an easier hand-off from school-age to adult services This smoother transition helps students and their families feel prepared for life beyond school.

With clear communication and guidelines, a commitment to engaging with community partners at the local level, and dedication to continued partnership, the School-to-Work initiative highlights how DDCS and DVR's collaboration leads to innovative programs to improve services at the statewide level.

Suggestions for Replication

Balance partnership with autonomy. DVR and DDCS have a history of bringing in local, multidisciplinary community partners to work with them on implementing policies. Whenever they begin a new initiative, the agencies include the community partners from the start. This helps clarify the policy and promotes its ownership and implementation. DVR and DDCS give room for the local leadership to figure out the details of policy implementation that will work for each of their individual counties.

Collaborate with your target community. Connect with the people being served. Contact local organizations and communities, such as people who live in rural areas and people who are members of tribal groups. Schedule meetings with community groups, especially groups that include people with disabilities, to hear about the current issues and get input about how to improve. When agencies like DVR and DDCS show up in the community, it shows that they are committed to meaningful progress.

Schedule and prioritize regular meetings. DVR and DDCS value their monthly meetings as opportunities to meet and cover a broad range of issues related to policy implementation. It can be tempting to take regular meetings for granted or become overwhelmed by a full schedule that leaves no time to attend them. But attending meetings regularly makes a difference in building and maintaining relationships.

Build a culture of collaboration. DVR and DDCS have embedded collaboration in all layers of their work. When new staff are hired, they are told how the agencies work closely together and are expected to uphold the partnership. Leaders support this culture of collaboration, and they model how to be a good partner. An MOU is a starting point to determine boundaries and responsibilities. From there, it is important that staff at all levels commit to working together, communicate across agencies, and partner on policies to support employment efforts.

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