

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
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Alabama Department of Mental Health: Increasing the Number of Certified Benefits Counselors

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Background

In 2016, Alabama's Department of Mental Health (ADMH)/Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) contracted with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) to train Community Partner Work Incentive counselors (CPWICs) to provide benefits counseling to individuals served by ADMH who were moving from facility-based day services into competitive integrated employment. State agency staff were aware that many individuals and their families chose not to pursue integrated employment for fear of losing Medicaid, cash benefits, and other income support programs. Over time, ADMH determined that there was a need to increase the number of Certified Work Incentives Counselors (CWICs) and CPWICs in the state. This is the second of two stories describing Alabama's efforts to expand benefits counseling services.

Implementation

ADMH/DDD has worked to increase the number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) working in the community. ADMH observed that many more people with IDD and their families could benefit from benefits counseling than the system had the capacity to provide, so they undertook efforts to train a greater number of their staff to provide this service.

Counselors employed by ADMH who want to become CWICs and CPWICs complete a 2-part assessment and certification training process

through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The initial training consists of a rigorous 40-hour program that supports staff and community partners in developing the basic knowledge and skills necessary to provide individualized work incentives counseling. There are two parts to the training:

1. Part 1 takes place over a 9-week period and involves completing a series of eleven online competency-based assessments
2. Part 2 takes the assessment process to the next level by evaluating participants' ability to apply the concepts for actual individuals they are serving

Once counselors successfully complete this training, they receive certification to provide benefits counseling.

Impact

The impact of increasing the number of benefits counselors (CWICs and CPWICs) in Alabama has meant that more people are receiving benefits counseling services, more rapidly. ADMH/DDD tracks referral data, including where referrals come from, individual demographics, employment status, benefits status, county, and disability type to allocate staff across the state and ensure the system has the capacity to meet the need for benefits counseling.

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People who request benefits planning services and sign release forms are generally referred to a counselor very quickly. One counselor explains, “Once we do get a referral, we get all our verifications back (from Social Security Administration) within one to two days.” To further facilitate the process, counselors have the flexibility to meet with people remotely or in person, reducing the wait time for a plan to be developed. Once the counselors develop plans with clients, they can provide ongoing, individualized follow-up services.

Lessons Learned

People need greater access to benefits planning.

Every state has certified benefits counselors available, however, they may not have enough counselors to meet the needs of everyone who could benefit from the service.

State agencies can take action to improve access.

Alabama’s early efforts to provide benefits counseling services helped them realize the need for more services. ADMH took steps to expand the number of certified counselors in the state.

Training for staff ensures staff have the required skills.

ADMH knew it was important that staff had the skills and abilities to provide benefits counseling services. By investing in a certified training program that included both classroom and practical instruction, the state ensured that the counselors were able to provide a high-quality service.

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