

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Implementation of
priority policy goals

Texas's Vocational Apprenticeship Program: Moving Adults into Integrated Employment through Training in Transferable, Marketable Skills

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Description of the Practice

A priority goal of the Texas Employment First policy is for working-age people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) receiving services to be earning a living through competitive integrated employment. The Texas Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has supported the nationally replicated Project Search™ programs to prepare students of transition age for community employment. More recently, DHHS has developed the Vocational Apprenticeship Program (VAP) as a statewide initiative to support the development of transferable and marketable employment skills in working-age adults.

Background

VAP is a year-long program that offers training in life and work skills to people with IDD and mental health conditions to prepare for employment in the community. Adults participate in apprenticeships, receiving training in workplace and daily living skills while performing real jobs at real workplaces alongside coworkers without disabilities. Although an employer may offer an apprentice a job upon completion of the program, the main goal for participants is to obtain transferable skills for careers and jobs that match their individual interests.

In 2018, knowing that the long-range goal was to implement VAP across Texas, a large geographically and socioeconomically diverse state, DHHS piloted the program in three state-supported living centers (SLCs). The location of

the pilots in the state-supported living centers gave program staff the opportunity to implement and refine the program before replicating at the local level.

These elements included the development of the program's manual as well as the refinement of the classroom training component and the processes for engaging employers and providing individualized support to apprentices. DHHS also gathered information about networks of local service providers across the state, known in Texas as local intellectual and developmental disability authorities (LIDDAs), and the contacts and other resources available to them to implement the VAP locally.

In 2019, DHHS contracted with 5 of the 39 LIDDAs across Texas to reach out to employers about creating apprenticeship opportunities and to refer adults to participate. DHHS also brought on staff members to facilitate the LIDDAs' employer outreach efforts. This sometimes meant engaging directly with employers about innovative apprenticeship opportunities, giving them an overview of the VAP and "paving the way" for employers and service providers to collaborate successfully to implement the program. The program's progress was slowed in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it continued to grow throughout 2021 and 2022, creating employment opportunities in more industries and counties.

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Implementation

Since the goal of the apprenticeship program is to provide participants with a real experience of employment, this experience begins with the application process. Individuals are usually referred to the program through VR counselors, families, or service providers and apply to participate at least two months before the next scheduled session. Applying to the program is like applying for a job. Applicants include their contact information and work history, and there is a reference check. Applicants also take part in an interview led by program instructors who have worked with employers to develop apprenticeships and can assess whether applicants fully understand the apprenticeship program and are therefore likely to participate successfully in the VAP.

Once apprentices are accepted, they begin by attending the classroom portion of the program. The classes continue throughout the year for two or three days a week, at a minimum of five hours per week. The curriculum includes 12 goals that the apprentices achieve through successfully completing activities that teach workplace skills, such as workplace safety, team-building, presentation skills, resume development, networking, and interviewing. Independent living skills such as personal care and managing money may also be covered, and the skills to keep a job are taught toward the end of the program.

Within a week of beginning the VAP, participants typically begin working at their first of two apprenticeships, each of which lasts 20 weeks. They work for 12 hours a week and are paid \$10 per hour. They receive support and mentorship from job coaches as needed, with the expectation that supports will fade as they become more confident at their jobs and classes. Throughout their participation, participants benefit from individualized supports and feedback to set and achieve employment and training goals. The apprentices are officially employed by the LIDDA supporting them to participate, not by the employer. The LIDDAs are funded to pay the participants and primarily set the rules and policies for program participation.

Currently, the VAP has apprenticeship opportunities in a variety of field, including hospitality, assisted living, retail, culinary, maintenance, and corporate sectors. Some apprenticeship opportunities are at larger employers, such as hotels and corporate offices, in which multiple apprentices participate. In these cases, the apprenticeships are individualized, and the apprentices are integrated into whichever department they work for rather than being segregated to a few locations or tasks. The apprentices are integrated as much as possible into their workplaces and follow workplace rules about behavior, taking lunch or breaks, being punctual, and reporting absences. Toward the end of the day, participants meet with a program instructor for a discussion about the successes and challenges of the day and ways to handle workplace situations or address problems. Participants who complete the year in the program graduate with certificates from their employers' showing completion of the apprenticeships.

Impact

The VAP has had an impressive return on investment. It began with eight program sites throughout the nine counties it serves and has expanded to 25, hosted by 19 employers. The sites offer 14 different types of apprenticeships in a wide range of industries. A total of 130 apprentices have participated in the VAP since it began, and 60 apprentices participated in 2022. Five LIDDAs are participating, and there were 10 graduation ceremonies in 2022. Although this program is new and its priority is to teach transferable marketable skills, 30% of graduates have found employment immediately after graduating.

In the future, if they receive state funding, the DHHS plans to expand to 25 of Texas's 39 LIDDAs. The goals are to bring the program all over the state, keep it going through 2025, and potentially impact up to 600 participants. The DHHS is beginning to communicate with the LIDDAs about bringing them onboard eight at a time. To make the program sustainable, the DHHS is working with the LIDDAs to leverage their own waiver funds to keep paying for

the apprenticeship program as well as to pay for job coaches to support apprentices to transition into supported employment. The LIDDAs also have further impetus to support an apprenticeship program that supports people to move into community employment because this aligns with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Home and Community-based waiver guidelines, set to go into effect in March 2023, which will no longer reimburse services in segregated, congregated settings.

The impact of this program on service providers, employers, and the apprentices themselves has been significant. Service providers have gained a clearer understanding about the value of providing community employment services. Employers have had positive experiences integrating apprentices with IDD into their workplaces and learning about their capabilities, and they have hired some graduates. Successful apprentices have worked or even been hired into industries that some of them previously only dreamed about entering. The apprentices' sense of pride and accomplishment are evident to family members and staff from the LIDDAs who attend program graduations. Their happiness at having found opportunities for meaningful community employment inspires the DHHS's advocacy efforts for this program.

Suggestions for Replication

Plan for long-range, scaled-up implementation.

Knowing that their plan was to implement the program across the large state of Texas, DHHS administrators piloted it at the state level to develop its procedures and materials and research how it could be implemented later at

the local level. Demonstrating success at the state level strengthened their position with the LIDDAs and gradually increased statewide support for the program.

Allocate staff to facilitate program growth and oversight.

Through their direct communication with state and local employers and their engagement with the LIDDAs, program administrators from DHHS understand the opportunities and challenges in various communities. With their guidance and expertise, communities adapt the model to stakeholder demands while remaining committed to developing integrated employment opportunities.

A real employment experience within an employment skills training program is invaluable to service providers, employers, and participants.

Service providers see the value in offering community employment, while employers learn about integrating and supporting individuals with disabilities at their workplaces. Successful participants graduate from the program with a good employer reference, work experience, and marketable skills.

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