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Iowa's Governance Group: Facilitating Partnerships That Support Integrated Employment

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Background

In 1998, five state agencies formed the Governance Group. Partner agencies included: Iowa Workforce Development, Department of Human Services, Department of Education, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Department of Human Rights. The group was developed in response to a Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) request for proposals that included an advisory group for systems change efforts to expand employment opportunities to individuals with disabilities. By 2000, the five original partners had expanded their efforts by agreeing to provide oversight and consultation to a Department of Labor (DOL) Work Incentive Grant and brought on two additional partners, the Department for the Blind and the Iowa Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Through its work, the group discovered that many barriers were the result of a system of services under multiple funding streams, with different performance measures and, sometimes, different missions. The Governance Group also identified that success within the system was due to positive interactions and collaboration. This motivated the members to continue meeting even after the initial grant expired. Subsequently, the Governance Group partner agencies signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in 2003, which continues to provide a framework for their ongoing collaborative efforts.

Implementation

The Governance Group provides collaborative input to grant and other activities being implemented within the state and by the various agencies. It is a partnership of agency representatives with the authority to deploy resources and affect policy for system changes. The goals of the Governance Group are to: develop collaborative policies that minimize duplication and maximize resources; identify best practices for replication and achievement of high quality employment for persons with disabilities; facilitate common work that is done by each agency; align policies and practices to achieve employment outcomes; provide a common and unified voice and commitment by state agencies; and coordinate financial resources to achieve efficient use of services that result in employment for persons with

disabilities.

In developing the group, it was important for members to develop a mutual mission. The group has a shared dedication to one outcome: increasing employment for persons with disabilities. Several principles were developed to guide the group, underlie its activities, and ensure that it meets this mission: implement a structure that is outcome oriented to resolve implementation problems (avoid being a social group); dialogue and embrace disagreements to facilitate improvements (avoid rubber stamping); implement a continuous quality improvement philosophy (avoid being a monitoring or oversight body); and infuse objectivity and focus on outcomes (avoid being a politically motivated group).

Each agency contributes resources to maintain a part-time staff person that takes minutes at meetings and administratively supports the group. In addition, to maintain communication and feedback from the local level, the partners have committed staff and resources to a statewide Support Team. The Support Team meets monthly to identify barriers and evaluate success of the local collaboration efforts. If barriers are identified and can be resolved locally, the Support Team provides guidance. If the issues require State-level decisions or change in policy or procedure, the Support Team raises those issues at the quarterly Governance Group meetings.

Impact

The group has been involved in many meaningful activities that have contributed to increasing employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. The group has developed collaborative partnerships, shared information across agencies, and leveraged federal funding for special projects. Specific activities include:

- Facilitated the launch of the Employer Disability Resource Network, which represents a collaboration of state, federal and private partners working to identify, develop and mobilize resources, supports and services that add value to Iowa businesses hiring persons with disabilities. Its web portal, www.EDRNetwork.org, provides easy access to a variety of resources for Iowa businesses.
- Collaborated with various statewide entities to administer their Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) program.
- Maintained strong connections with the state's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) program. This collaboration has enhanced the ability of One-Stop Career Centers and their Disability Navigators to reach out to and connect with Iowa's Medicaid recipients, and has expanded the outreach of the WIPA program throughout the state.
- Supported the development of the Disability Specialist Initiative. In eight Workforce Regions, disability specialists were hired and completed disability training with a primary focus on case management.

The success of the group can in part be contributed to the stability of its members. A stakeholder noted that there has been little turnover among staff that participate. However, recently there has been some attrition of members and over the past few years, members have been concerned that it has devolved into more of an activity-reporting meeting, with less emphasis on discussion and brainstorming ideas. The group has resolved to re-focus its efforts towards the identification and removal of barriers to increasing employment for individuals with disabilities. The group's Impact Statement details its future directions and next steps for refining and achieving its goals. The group hopes to assist member and related

agencies in work with their employment projects, the Department of Human Services' work with the State Employment Leadership Network (please see: <http://www.seln.org/>), and the grassroots Employment First efforts.

Suggestions for replication

- Develop a shared mission statement and guiding principles to underlie the work of the group
- Ensure that there are "decision-makers" at the table from each agency, e.g. staff who have the authority to allocate staffing and other resources.
- A stakeholder has noted that the most important aspect of the group is that it is relatively free from the regulatory nature of state government, since it is not housed within any one department. While this is a positive attribute of the group, this must be balanced with the group having enough power to put "teeth" behind their recommendations

*This brief includes information from source documents: Governance Group, Impact Statement; and Governor's Group History document, and the Interagency Memorandum of Agreement.

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