

FROM THE EDITOR

250,000 by 1998?

This issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, which is guest edited by Dr. Larry Rhodes from the University of Oregon, reflects an awareness of the need to deepen the alliances between rehabilitation and business. Dr. Rhodes has assembled articles from a wonderful cross-section of people from the business and disability fields who present their views on the importance of marketing quality rehabilitation services. There is a growing recognition, finally, that human service programs must be the ones to approach businesses with a plan to market employment support services. The articles in this issue complement each other in a timely fashion. This issue will be of significant interest to those in rehabilitation, supported employment, and, it is hoped, many in business and industry.

The theme of business and marketing is also highly appropriate when reviewing the progress made in supported employment programs over the past 7 years. Recent telephone surveys to the 50 states made by West, Revell, and Wehman indicate that ~75,000 people with severe disabilities were participating in supported employment at the end of September 1991. Current projections for 1994 by West (West, M., personal communication, 1993) indicate that 135,000–140,000 people will be involved in supported employment.

What goals can we set for people participating in supported employment by 1998, 5 years from now? I propose that we shoot for at least 250,000 people being placed into the competitive workforce and receiving all sorts of different supports to help them maintain employment. Why 250,000? There is no special reason except that this would account for roughly 20–25% of the total people presently in segregated day programs nationally and would begin to make a serious impact on the current standards of practice. Second, if West's projections of 135,000–140,000 people in supported employment are correct (West, M., personal communication, 1993), then an annual growth rate of 18–20% may not be all that unreal-

istic, especially given that we went from 9,800 people to 75,000 from 1986 to 1990.

What then do we have to accomplish to hit this goal? What specific needs must be met to keep up this momentum? First, <10% of all individuals currently participating in supported employment have physical disabilities, traumatic brain injury, autism, or sensory impairment, yet there is tremendous interest and need for services among many of these people. Therefore, expanding opportunities for underserved or unserved populations with severe disabilities is one very definite need. We must learn better ways to modify supported employment models to accommodate the vast range of needs presented by individuals with many different disabilities. We must study and disseminate ways to include minorities with disabilities, most of whom have been forgotten.

A second area of need that must be further developed is alliances with business and industry, particularly in light of the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the greater responsibilities that business will need to take to establish reasonable accommodation and nondiscriminatory hiring practices. The combination of job coach liaison and natural business support is more important than ever. We view this as critical because provision of natural support to people with disabilities who have been hired will be much easier when strong business alliances exist. The recently passed Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 directly include natural support as a vehicle for extended services. This issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* is a good illustration of how this need can be met.

A third area, discussed heavily in the late 1980s but in which very little progress has been made, is long-term funding. A major nemesis of many well-established programs that prevents more people with disabilities from gaining access to services is the lack of ongoing support dollars to help maintain the covenant that is made with business on the initial hiring. As state and federal govern-

ments get their fiscal houses in order, long-term funding will need continued legislative and administrative policy attention. We plan extensive research into ways to leverage vocational rehabilitation funds and increase funding from other sources, such as the Social Security Administration and the Job Training Partnership Act, for supported employment.

Fourth, there continues to be an ongoing need to improve supported employment technology and the efficiency with which this technology is delivered. We need to know more about how to help people with the most severe disabilities enter the workforce. We need to know how to help people who have been supported for a number of years reduce the amount of support needed and/or move into more competitive, better paying positions. We also need to know how to integrate assistive technology, i.e., robotics, computers, and electronics, so as to empower the job coach and consumer at the job site.

Fifth, we must continue to improve our ways of delivering technical assistance to those local programs converting to supported employment, recruiting and training new job coaches, or that need help with new populations. Training and technical assistance is high on the list of needs because technology is of little value if it cannot be broadly delivered. Consider comments made at the National Conference of State Legislatures by the Task Force on Developmental Disabilities (1991; p. 28):

Despite the advantages of supported employment, the bulk of state employment funds for persons with disabilities still goes to sheltered workshops and other segregated settings. In 1988, federal and state governments spent between \$385 and \$582 million to place 109,899 people with developmental disabilities in sheltered workshops at a per capita rate between \$3,500 and \$5,300. In the same year, only \$62 million was spent on 16,458 people in supported employment, at a per capita rate of \$3,767. The challenge facing state legislators is to develop methods to transfer

people currently in day programs and sheltered workshops into the competitive work force successfully.

Sixth, we must reach out to the consumers and their families by including choice and self-determination processes in the context of vocational planning. The need for informal choice in supported employment programs on the part of consumers is a paramount concern.

Seventh, there is a strong need for practical and applied research that state vocational rehabilitation agencies can use to help in program implementation. We need to be highly responsive to the calls for help and assistance from state vocational rehabilitation agencies. They must be major implementors in this process.

Finally, we cannot possibly overlook the continuing large gaps in job coach training, both at the preservice as well as continuing education levels. Cohen and Pelavin (1992), in their *1992 Survey of Personnel Shortages and Training Needs in Vocational Rehabilitation* indicate that supported employment specialists are in very short supply, as reported by vocational rehabilitation agencies. Over 200 supported employment positions went unfilled for at least 90 days as noted in this survey; 450 positions were unfilled nationally.

The challenge of having 250,000 participants in supported employment by 1998 is substantial. Are we in the field up to it? We must all pull together to make it happen.

Paul Wehman, PhD

REFERENCES

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