Summary

Significant and fundamental changes in how career development and support services are provided to individuals with disabilities have been fostered with the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999. All of these reforms focus on the principles of self-determination and empowerment, individualized and flexible service delivery, full and easy access to services, removal of financial disincentives, and access to training and supports so that individuals can reach their full potential.

The One-Stop system has been envisioned and developed as one mechanism for achieving these goals. Benefits counseling is a critical service component to any employment service system for people with disabilities, and the development of an agreement between a BPA&O and One-Stop Career Center takes the first step toward that development. A strong and mutual relationship between the Benefits Specialists and the One-Stop staff is a second major step toward implementation of a customer friendly system of access. Third, the BPA&O and One-Stop Center must develop clear and appropriate policies and procedures for collaboration with individual customers.

Integrating BPA&O services within the One-Stop Career Centers (considered a "mainstream" environment) has increased customer base and improved access to services in Wisconsin.

Internet Resources

Social Security Administration:

- www.ssa.gov/work/

Department of Labor-One-Stops:

- www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/onestop/

Publications:

- www.communityinclusion.org/publications/

Endnotes:

[1] SSA (2004). The Work Site, BPAO Programs, retrieved: http://www.ssa.gov/work/ServiceProviders/bpaofactsheet.html
[2] P.L. 105-220.
[3] 64 FR 9403-9404 (February 25, 1999).
[4] 64 FR 9403-9404 (February 25, 1999).
[5] 20 CFR 662.100(a)
[6] Section 134(c) of WIA (29 U.S.C.2864(c)); 20 CFR 662.100(c).
[7] SSA, (2001). Request for Agreement, BPAO Services. Federal Register, (66) 4. Retrieved, 2/21/2005. pp. 1168-1180.

The authors would like to acknowledge contributions from the following individuals in the production of this brief, Toni Bender and Holly Higgins-Johnson from Employment Resources, Inc.

This is one of a series of briefs that has been designed to disseminate information pertaining to promising practices within the BPA&O and PABSS network. This publication is neither an endorsement of the practice or statement regarding the mandated work of this network. The thoughts, opinions and practices expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the viewpoints or official policy positions of either the Social Security Administration or Cornell University.

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June 2005

Work Incentives Support Center

Promising Practices

Creating Model Partnerships to Promote Employment of People with Disabilities

BPA&O Collaboration with One-Stop Centers, Part II

Partnering with Disability Program Navigators:

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Background

The Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach (BPA&O) program, established as part of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentive Improvement Act of 1999, has created a system of specialists in every state who provide individualized benefits and work incentive counseling services to social security beneficiaries. The BPA&Os are operated by a variety of types of organizations, including centers for independent living, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, private, non-profit vocational providers, among others. In order to reach a diverse population of individuals with disabilities who are interested in employment and to cover their geographic areas, the BPA&O projects reach out to state, local, private and public vocational agencies and schools.

The goal of the Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach program is to better enable SSA`s beneficiaries with disabilities to make informed choices about work. The BPA&Os provide work incentives planning and assistance to SSA`s beneficiaries with disabilities; conduct outreach efforts to those beneficiaries and their families who are potentially eligible to participate in Federal or State work incentives programs and; work in cooperation with Federal, State, and private agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve beneficiaries with disabilities[1].

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has also undertaken major reform with the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998[2]. The WIA requires states to streamline services for eligible individuals by integrating multiple employment and training programs at the "street level" through the creation of One-Stop Career Centers. According to DOL, eligible individuals include individuals with disabilities and other persons with multiple barriers to employment[3]. In order to make services available to all customers, the One-Stop system must be accessible to persons with disabilities[4].

The One-Stop delivery system is envisioned as a system under which One-Stop "partners" responsible for administering separate workforce investment, educational and other human resource programs and funding streams collaborate to create a seamless system of service delivery that will enhance access to the program's services and improve long-term employment outcomes for individuals receiving assistance[5]. The system must include at least one comprehensive physical center, that must provide core services, in each local area and must provide access to other programs and activities carried out by One-Stop partners[6].

The One-Stop system has been identified by the Social Security Administration (SSA) as an important element in the development and implementation of the initiatives set forth in the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act. The SSA has encouraged BPA&Os to collaborate with and become local One-Stop partners[7].

Part Two of this two-part series on successful collaboration between One-Stop Career Centers and BPA&O projects includes a profile of Employment Resources Inc., and a One-Stop Career Center in Madison, Wisconsin, the Oshkosh Workforce Development Center.

Partnering with Disability Navigators: Employment Resources, Inc., in Wisconsin

As part of the system paradigm shift toward greater access to employment services (Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act), and streamlined access to services (WIA), the Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of Labor have collaborated to pilot a system of "Disability Navigator" positions in several states. The Disability Navigators assist One-Stop customers with disabilities to find employment-related supports and services both within the One-Stops and in the community.

Collaboration Increases the Customer Base

Employment Resources Inc. (ERI), a BPA&O project in Wisconsin, serves individuals throughout a predominantly rural, 35 county area. The Disability Navigator, whose main office resides in the Oshkosh Workforce Development Center, also serves a 7 county rural area. (There are currently 8 Navigators in the Oshkosh service area). Collaboration between the two programs began when a BPA&O staff at ERI contacted a Disability Navigator in their service area. The Disability Navigator agreed to collaborate with ERI BPA&O staff to provide an outreach seminar on work incentives and local agency services for people in the Oshkosh area of Wisconsin. Together they developed a flyer to advertise the event and mailed it to over 800 current SSA beneficiaries and recipients, utilizing a database ERI received from the Social Security Administration. ERI and the One-Stop jointly funded the mass mailing asking participants to respond if they were planning to attend. Twenty-five participants replied.

The outreach event featured four specialists giving short presentations about their respective programs. They included: the Disability Navigator, a Benefits Specialists from ERI, a Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, and a Social Security Administration Work Incentives Liaison (WIL). The BPA&O Benefits Specialist and the SSA WIL collaborated to provide an additional two hour education seminar about SSI and SSDI work incentives. To conclude the program, participants were asked to complete a program evaluation and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Many individuals indicated they plan to pursue returning to work as a result of the information they learned. This jointly funded and jointly planned event has now laid the groundwork for continued partnership between the BPA&O staff and the Disability Navigator.

Improved Access to Services

The Benefits Specialist and the Disability Navigator now meet together on a quarterly basis at each job center in the Disability Navigator's service area. At each site, the Benefits Specialist and Disability Navigator schedule several hours together to provide outreach events and/or meet with individual beneficiaries/recipients of Social Security. ERI is learning that by meeting a One-Stop customer who is a new BPA&O referral together with the Disability Navigator (who already has a relationship with that customer), the Benefit Specialists can build trust quicker, which increases the chance that the individual follows up with a Benefits Analysis and other services. It also increases the working knowledge each professional has of the other's content area.

In addition, the BPA&O project and One-Stop Centers are placing flyers in places like disability newsletters, at the Social Security offices, etc., to target services directly to beneficiaries and customers with disabilities. This differs from previous outreach activities that have been targeted towards human service agencies, with the hope that they would refer their constituency for benefit planning services.

A second collaborative venture that ERI is involved with is occurring in the town of Racine, WI where a jointly-sponsored outreach seminar was held that targeted human service agency personnel. Racine is part of the rural 35-county service area of ERI's contract. As the Benefits Specialists have few natural connections in this area, the Disability Navigator's previous networking in prior job functions were very helpful in targeting participants for this seminar and for introducing participants to ERI's BPA&O services.

The third collaborative opportunity currently being planned involves targeting transition aged youth. One of the Disability Navigators is well networked with schools in a specific county. There are plans for the Disability Navigator and the Benefits Specialists to set up presentations in each school by providing 2 short seminars in each (one in the daytime and one in the evening, to meet family scheduling needs), which will be jointly sponsored and presented.

Moving Forward

The collaboration between the One-Stops system and some BPA&O programs have been so successful that it is recommended that BPA&O agencies seek out and begin to work with One-Stop Centers in their service areas. It is further recommended that the BPA&Os and One-Stops use this collaboration as an opportunity to bring together all of the primary stakeholders including Vocational Rehabilitation, SSA Work Incentive Liaisons, Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security staff (PABSS), and others to explain their services and network with beneficiaries.

Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach services are an integral piece of the job placement process for individuals with disabilities, ideally occurring as one of the very first steps. Benefits planning is a very individualized and time intensive service, often spanning several months or more. Although the BPA&O / One-Stop collaborations highlighted in this two-part series have been very successful, there is not enough capacity to collaborate with all the One-Stops and to provide benefits counseling to all the customers with disabilities. More collaboration between SSA and DOL at the federal and state levels would help facilitate the growth and expansion of benefits planning and related services in One-Stops.