

a car through her PASS Plan, and secured employment. This happened because the BPA&O Benefits Specialist and the One-Stop staff worked as a team to get her what she needed to go to work, and it all happened in one convenient, totally accessible location.

"This kind of program should be available in every One-Stop in the country, to assist a population that has been ignored for too long," states Rexene Picard, Executive Director of FutureWorks, a One-Stop Career Center in Springfield, Massachusetts.

"Having a BPA&O on CareerPoint's premises has increased resource possibilities," remarks David Gadaire, Executive Director of CareerPoint. *"Since the origin of this relationship, CareerPoint has been awarded a Workforce Incentive Grant, became the first Career Center in the country to become an Employment Network under the Ticket to Work program, partnered in a State Allocation Grant, received Navigator funding, and has been asked to trial a DOL Workforce Action Grant."*

As one BPA&O/ One-Stop customer stated: *"I was very pleased to work with the Benefits Specialist at CareerPoint,"*. *"I liked the fact that I was not singled out as a person with a psychiatric disability and that I had all the services of the Career Center at my disposal. I was given prompt, accurate service and the counseling helped me clarify some misinformation I had received elsewhere. I run a consumer support center for people with psychiatric disabilities and have referred many of them for benefits counseling at the Career Centers in their areas. Thank you for your much needed work."*

Co-location of services provides exceptional opportunities as highlighted in this promising practice. Part II of this brief further explores possible collaboration strategies between One-Stop and BPA&O staffing with the goal of promoting employment outcomes for people with disabilities served by these two systems.

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.

This is one of a series of articles that have been reviewed for accuracy by the Social Security Administration (SSA), Office of Employment Support Programs. However, the thoughts and opinions expressed in these materials are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints or official policy positions of the SSA.

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Work Incentives Support Center

Promising Practices

Creating Model Partnerships to Promote Employment of People with Disabilities

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

Co-location of One Stop and BPA&O Services:

Resource Partnership (Massachusetts)

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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 disabilities¹.

Massachusetts

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has also undertaken major reform with the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998². 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 employment³. In order to make services available to all customers, the One-Stop system must be accessible to persons with disabilities⁴.

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 assistance⁵. 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 partners⁶.

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 partners⁷.

Part One of this two-part series on successful collaboration between One-Stop Career Centers and BPA&O projects includes a profile of the Resource Partnership, and One-Stop Career Centers in western Massachusetts.

The Challenge: Providing Benefits Counseling as Part of a Comprehensive Employment System

One of the primary challenges for BPA&O projects is where, when and how to connect with beneficiaries who are interested in going to work and who need benefits counseling. It is particularly difficult to reach out to those beneficiaries who are not already involved

with a human service system or who live in rural, underserved areas of a BPA&O project’s region. Conversely, one major challenge for WIA-funded One-Stop Centers is how to provide necessary, individualized services to individuals with disabilities. The One-Stop Centers provide WIA core employment services to individuals who qualify, however, they do not have the in-house benefits counseling expertise to offer customers with disabilities. As directed by the WIA, the One-Stops must seek out this expertise and make it available.

One-Stop Center Co-Location: Resource Partnership, BPA&O in Massachusetts

In western Massachusetts, a BPA&O Benefits Specialist approached a One-Stop Career Center (CareerPoint in Holyoke) looking for office space to meet with beneficiaries who were seeking benefits counseling services. From the BPA&O’s perspective, the advantages of collaborating with CareerPoint were: CareerPoint’s policy of universal access: Any person with a disability was given access, regardless of severity or need; CareerPoint is open on weekends, which allows access to benefits counseling for customers who are working or attending school (this is not an option at most other state agencies); and CareerPoint’s building and web sites are accessible. Their computer lab is fitted with adaptive technology to accommodate all disabilities.

Some of the challenges faced when the BPA&O first started providing services within the One-Stops included sharing customer information without violating confidentiality and reporting outcomes as a result of the collaboration. Although data sharing is not a requirement of the collaboration, the BPA&O provides periodic reports to the One-Stops on BPA&O activities. These reports do not include specific client information but they do include such things as the number of clients seen, services provided, recommendations made, and other aggregate demographic information such as gender and age. The One-Stops are then able to integrate this information into their reports as they need. The BPA&O staff also encourage beneficiaries to explore the other services the Career Centers have to offer and to sign up to become a member, if they so choose.

Although there is no formal, written agree-

ment or memorandum of understanding between Resource Partnership’s BPA&O program and the One-Stop delivery system, a foundation has been laid for providing needed benefits counseling services to customers with disabilities through the One-Stop centers. The BPA&O currently pays rent to one Career Center in western Massachusetts where the Benefits Specialists has office space, computer, phone, and office support services. Career Point has since introduced the Resource Partnership to five additional One-Stop Career Centers in western Massachusetts, growing to a total of 10 Resource Partnership BPA&O/One-Stop Career Center locations across the state of Massachusetts.

Collaboration increases the customer base

The collaboration between the Resource Partnership BPA&O program and One-Stops has been beneficial for all parties involved, particularly the customers. The One-Stop Career Centers provide customer referrals to the BPA&O staff. In some instances, the Benefits Specialist reports to work in the morning with a full schedule of appointments made by the Career Center staff. Additionally, the One-Stop Career Centers include information about benefits counseling and the BPA&O services in mailings, brochures, orientation packets and sessions and on their websites, increasing the BPA&O’s visibility and outreach efforts. The Career Centers have also shared the costs or provided ASL interpreters or Spanish language interpreters for the Benefits Specialists when they worked with One-Stop customers. Additionally, BPA&O staff have been invited to participate, at no cost to the BPA&O, in One-Stop technology trainings.

Collaboration improves the quality of services

Collaboration between the BPA&O program and the One-Stop Career Centers enables on-site benefits counseling to One-Stop customers as part of their job search. Benefits Specialists provide ongoing counseling and technical assistance on benefits/work incentives issues to One-Stop Career Center customers and staff.

“The contribution of the Resource Partnership’s Benefits Specialist has become the cornerstone of our center’s efforts to increase

services to customers with disabilities,” states David Gadaire, Executive Director of CareerPoint. “The number of customers with disabilities our center serves has increased four fold, and the average number of services each customer receives now surpasses that of our non-disabled customer base.”

The Benefits Specialists contribute as members of the One-Stop disability committees and as participants at staff meetings. The Resource Partnership is also active on the Workforce Investment Board (WIBs are a required element of the One-Stop system), providing expertise and input and therefore enhancing Career Center services to customers with disabilities.

“The presence of Benefits Specialists at each Career Center has been an excellent outreach and recruitment tool for encouraging job seekers with disabilities to use One-Stop services,” states Brad Sperry, Associate Director of the Hampden County Regional Employment Board. “State VR agencies and their subcontracted providers are more likely to refer job seekers to a Career Center knowing that their customers will be provided accurate and timely information on benefits management. Most importantly, job seekers that have had good experiences at a Career Center tell their peers and this stimulates ‘word of mouth’ referrals.”

“Sheila”

One shared customer of the Resource Partnership and CareerPoint, who had previously been determined ineligible for services by the State Vocational Rehabilitation agency came to the Career Center seeking job skills training, information about how work would affect her Social Security benefits, assistance with purchasing a car, writing a resume, interviewing, and conducting a job search. This individual first met with the Resource Partnership Benefits Specialist located at the One-Stop Career Center and was given the benefits information she needed. As a result, she decided she wanted to pursue employment. The Benefits Specialist assisted her with writing a Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS) to finance a car and referred her to the One-Stop WIA counselor to obtain job skills training. While she was involved with her chosen training program, she also received services from the One-Stop on interviews, resume writing, and conducting a job search. A few months later she had completed training, purchased