with funding from an SSA-funded contract. Individuals who work with VCIL set their own goals and "take an active role in attainment of these goals. " Benefits counseling is provided by peer counselors as part of their typical independent living services, or as a discreet service to peers who seek out benefits and work incentive advice. "VCIL's staff may take a role as a sounding board. They can be supportive in brainstorming, and problem-solving, and help in identifying options and resources. The process is vital to building self-esteem and fostering true independence. In working with our peers, we remember that we do not have the ability to heal, convert, fix, or change the peer" (VCIL, 2005). The benefits counseling services provided by a VCIL benefits specialist reflect an interaction between peers, and, as such, the quality and nature of that relationship differs markedly from what the individual would experience from "agency-based" services.

Outcome

VCIL has also become a member of the state's extensive benefits counseling and vocational services system. VCIL benefits specialists are able to provide outreach and benefits and work incentives planning and assistance services as part of the center's comprehensive services to VCIL members. The services are provided "peer to "peer," and offer an option to individuals who are uncomfortable with the services of a formal "client/professional" relationship.

Testimonial

"I wanted to work with a Benefit Counselor at VCIL because I am on the Ticket to Work Program but didn't understand how it worked. I needed to have it explained to me. VCIL gave me information about my ticket and I am still on the program. I also wanted to be given insight to what I am eligible for but not receiving. I am working and doing the best I can but it is hard to make ends meet and I don't believe in working the system. I just wanted to know what I have the right to know."

-VCIL Peer and Benefits Counseling Recipient

Summary

Independent living represents a unique philosophy, provides a strong community bond, and offers a mode of self-help and peer-to-peer assistance that have transformed the lives of many individuals with disabilities and has impacted disability policy and practice. Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach services funded by the Social Security Administration have been significantly influenced by the independent living philosophy and are, in many states, provided by IL Centers. The IL/BPA&O services provided by the Vermont Center for Independent Living and Granite State Independent Living are just two of many examples of how Centers for Independent Living are supporting their community members to become more self-sufficient to have greater informed choice.

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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.

Contact Information

Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute
201 ILR Extension
Ithaca, New York 14853-3901

t. 607-255-7727
f. 607-255-2763
tty 607-255-2891
ilr_edi@cornell.edu

www.edi.cornell.edu

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ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

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Promising Practices

Creating Model Partnerships to Promote Employment of People with Disabilities

Vermont & New Hampshire

Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach Services Provided by Centers for Independent Living

JoAnne Malloy, WISC Training and Organizational Development Specialist
Barb Otto, WISC State Systems Development Specialist

The Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach (BPA&O) program has been developed by SSA to provide accurate, current, individualized benefits and work incentives information to people with disabilities. Benefits and work incentives counseling services allow individuals with disabilities to make informed choices and can contribute to their ability to self-advocate around issues of employment. There are currently 113 BPA&O projects covering beneficiaries in every state plus Puerto Rico and the U. S. Virgin Islands. The BPA&O programs are operated by state vocational rehabilitation agencies, private non-profit and private for-profit corporations, and 38 are operated by Centers for Independent Living. This promising practice brief outlines the unique characteristics of two BPA&O projects operated by IL Centers in two New England states: The Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), and New Hampshire's Granite State Independent Living (GSIL).

Background

The independent living movement began with individuals with disabilities who wanted equal access to the primary economic, social, physical, and educational institutions in their communities. Developed as a social movement, much like the civil rights and feminist movements of the same time period, the independent living philosophy gained strength in the 1970's. Much of the independent living paradigm, developed by Gerben DeJong in the late 1970s, proposed a shift in thinking about disability, from a medical (disease-based) to an independent living model. The independent living philosophy stresses that disability is a natural part of the human condition, and that it is the institutions, policies, and relationships, not the individuals, that must change to accommodate people with disabilities. Independent living theory locates the problems or "deficiencies" in the society, not the individual.

Several significant policies affecting individuals with disabilities have been adopted in the past 3 decades as a result, in part, of this shift toward an independent living philosophy. The 1978 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 added statutory language and funding for the formation of Centers for Independent Living. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), was enacted in 1975, providing significant safeguards and a strong emphasis on inclusive education services for children and youth with disabilities, later becoming the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Public Law 101-336, enacted July 26, 1990, codifies the basic civil rights of access and opportunity for individuals with disabilities. The ADA prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation. Additionally, the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999, includes full recognition of the values of self-determination, choice, and equal access to supports such as health care for individuals with disabilities who are dependent on Social Security and related public benefit programs so they may become employed to the fullest extent possible. These federal, as well as state and local changes are evidence of how public policy and practice have made a dramatic shift toward ensuring self-determination and community inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

The Challenge: Reaching Individuals with Benefits Information using an Independent Living Model of Service and Advocacy

Information can be powerful, and Independent Living Centers understand that their constituents need accurate and up-to-date benefits and work incentives information in order to fully participate in employment and related activities. Independent Living Centers are also able to provide a holistic look at services and programs that individuals need to coordinate when returning to work. IL Centers can provide information on attendant care options, assistive technology, transportation options, as well as the advocacy and peer counseling services. It is well-documented that individualized, personalized benefits planning and assistance services are related to higher rates of employment for beneficiaries of Social Security. It is also powerful when individuals with disabilities hear about positive employment and benefits management experiences from other individuals with disabilities. One of the unique features of BPA&O programs operated by IL Centers is that services are provided in an atmosphere where the beneficiary is considered an equal partner or "peer," (at VCIL, for example), not a "client," or a "customer." The beauty of peer counseling is there are many questions that individuals need answered when returning to work, most of which they don't even know to ask. Peer counselors can help beneficiaries with the information they need to make an informed decision about work.

Additionally, the IL philosophy is guided by the principles of individual choice and control over the type, duration and provision of services, including choice of where, when and how one receives benefits counseling and work incentives information. The IL/BPA&O model offers a unique type of benefits advisement service that combines highly technical advisement within a peer support and recovery framework.

Practices that Make IL/BPA&O Programs Unique

New Hampshire's BPA&O program is operated by Granite State Independent Living (GSIL). "**GSIL**'s mission is fulfilled largely through providing advocacy to ensure full participation in society, peer support by connecting people with disabilities with each other, information and referrals on independent living issues, and skills training to teach everyday skills that allow individuals to live on their own terms".

The IL benefits counselor works toward the IL mission by providing individuals with information that they can use to make informed choices. Conversely, IL centers will often advocate for individuals with disabilities, and yet advocacy by BPA&Os vis a vis the Social Security Administration is prohibited under their SSA BPA&O contract. In order to deal with this "tension" between strong advocacy versus empowerment of individuals the GSIL BPA&O program in New Hampshire reaches out to and collaborates with other "workforce development" agencies and systems in the state.

For example, GSIL is a standing member of the NH Governor's Task Force on Employment and Economic Opportunity. The Task Force has developed the state's TWWIIA-related projects and systems, including the BPA&O program, the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), the Workforce Improvement Grant (WIG), and a U. S. Department of Labor Youth Transition Alignment project. As a result of these collaborative efforts, GSIL has been able to "leverage" resources to expand its BPA&O benefits counseling capacity from 1 to 4 benefits specialists, who are part of the statewide New Hampshire Works system using the One-Stop fully accessible centers. The location of the benefits specialists at One-Stop offices allows individuals with disabilities to access all of the Workforce Improvement Act (WIA) employment services in addition to specialized BPA&O counseling. Most recently, the GSIL BPA&O program has developed a fee-for-service structure with the NH vocational rehabilitation agency, allowing individuals with disabilities who are VR customers the opportunity to receive benefits counseling from the IL center on a fee-paid basis.

Outcome

New relationships have formed in the New Hampshire workforce system as result of GSIL's BPA&O program. GSIL is now a recognized and valued partner among formal and informal providers of employment services and supports for individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities trust the information given to them by the NH benefits specialists, and are able to take action based on that information.

Testimonial

"I am writing in support and appreciation of the BPA&O program of the Granite State Independent Living. It was through them that I was able to get all information, referral, advocacy and assistance in managing benefits and applications in a coordinated manner with all the different agencies involved. If people with disabilities are given appropriate support in employment and in managing their benefits, not only would more people with disabilities normally go to work, but they would be contributing to the economy as taxpaying citizens."

-Robert P., Beneficiary

The Vermont BPA&O, Vermont Center for Independent Living, **VCIL**, has a philosophy that individuals be given great freedom to "take charge of their own lives and achieve their independent living goals".

The Vermont VCIL/BPA&O program has created a benefits counseling service that functions as an alternative to and in collaboration with a network of benefits counselors established in 1997 by the state vocational rehabilitation