Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

June 2006

Work Incentives Support Center

Promising Practices

Creating Model Partnerships to Promote Employment of People with Disabilities

Reaching Out to Rhode Island's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community

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Introduction

Protection and Advocacy (PABSS) staff are responsible for providing legal services to social security recipients who are facing barriers in their efforts to return to work. Benefits Specialists are responsible for reaching out to all recipient communities within their territory to provide information and planning services when a recipient is considering a work effort.

In September of 2004, the Rhode Island BPA&O project noted that deaf and hard of hearing individuals were not utilizing benefits counseling services. A work group was created to address this situation and develop a strategy. The strategy included outreach to community groups and agencies serving deaf and hard of hearing individuals and aggressive referrals of deaf and hard of hearing individuals to benefits planners by the state's vocational rehabilitation workers. In preparation for this work, benefits planners received training in using a TTY, placing calls through the Rhode Island Relay Service and effectively utilizing sign language interpreters.

As the deaf and hard of hearing community began participating in benefits planning activities, the number of referrals to the PABSS agency also increased, resulting in the necessary effort to accommodate the unique communication method used by this community.

Differences Between ASL and English

American Sign Language (ASL) is one of the principal methods of communication of the deaf and hard of hearing community. ASL differs from the English language in that it shares few grammatical similarities with English language and it does not have a written form. Thus the use of English as a method of communication completely fails to meet the communication needs of the deaf or hard of hearing consumer, especially with written notices sent by agencies such as the Social Security Administration. As ASL and written English are two distinct languages, written English is no more understandable to a deaf or hard of hearing consumer than the "signs" are to a hearing person. Attempting to communicate with a deaf or hard of hearing consumer through written English almost completely blocks access to information concerning consumer rights and program information, unless the consumer has been trained to read English.

The Solution

In order for effective services to be provided to this community, BPA&O staff make direct referrals, as appropriate, to the PABSS staff. Each potential client is scheduled for an interview with a PABSS attorney and a qualified ASL interpreter. BPA&O staff ensures that the client is available at the scheduled time and provides copies of information collected during the benefits planning process, after securing proper releases of information. The length of time necessary for a thorough and complete interview with a client through a sign language interpreter requires an initial two hour appointment. These interviews take longer for several reasons. The advocate must solicit much more factual information about the client's attempts at dealing directly with SSA. The advocate must also explain the client's need to sign authorizations to SSA and to other relevant entities, such as current and former employers, and explain what PABSS will do for the client. The Rhode Island PABSS have also invited, with the client's permission, the BPA&O staff member who worked with the client to attend the initial interview to help the advocate gather as much information as possible and explain the client's rights based on the information available.

After completing the intake process, a PABSS staff member begins to collect information concerning the individual's social security file by contacting the Area Work Incentive Coordinator (AWIC). A letter soliciting information and copies of relevant documents is sent to the District Office handling the individual's social security claim. The advocate also requests to schedule a file review. Once all relevant and necessary SSA information is in hand, a second meeting with the client, a PABSS staff member and an interpreter is scheduled. Follow up meetings are then scheduled as necessary.

By providing targeted outreach and accessible communication means and services, both programs have experienced an increase in participation from the deaf and hard of hearing community.

The author would like to acknowledge contributions from the following individuals in the production of this brief, Jeanne Fay from the Rhode Island Department of Human Services-ORS, and Charles Messina from the Rhode Island Disability Law Center.

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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