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Cross-Pollination Between VR Agencies
National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI)

Cohort Q – Group 6

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the challenges facing Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies across the United States, emphasizing the complexities created by diverse state laws, policies, and practices. The paper proposes fostering a culture of "cross-pollination" through improved communication and information-sharing. The creation of a shared database or "wiki" would allow VR agencies at all leadership levels to connect, exchange best practices, and adapt successful models across state lines. This innovative strategy, using technology, will result in better service delivery for individuals with disabilities and drive improved national outcomes.

Impact

The VR grant is complex, and the diversity in how it is administered across states and territories adds further layers of complexity to an already intricate system. The 78 VR agencies, each operating with different state laws, policies, and practices tailored to their state or territory's specific needs, are impacted in the following ways:

- **Duplication of Effort and Resources:** Low coordination between agencies leads to unnecessary utilization and duplication of resources, research, and solutions. Many agencies are addressing similar challenges—whether it's improving employment outcomes, increasing access to services, or technological needs—but are working in silos. Agencies may unknowingly be reinventing the wheel, spending time and money on solutions or research that other agencies have already explored, tested, or even perfected. This redundancy not only wastes resources but also delays the development and implementation of effective strategies.
- **Missed Opportunities for Collaboration and Best Practice Sharing:** Without a systematic way to share lessons learned and leverage the expertise and experiences of other agencies, the VR system operates in isolation, reducing its overall impact. This could include everything from optimizing the use of technology to designing more inclusive programs for people with disabilities.
  Barriers to Cross-State Learning and Innovation: The diversity of operations among the 78 VR agencies creates a barrier to cross-state learning. Each state or territory faces its own set of challenges, but by working in isolation, agencies miss opportunities to learn from one another and adopt innovative solutions.
- **Reduced Impact on Goals:** VR programs are critical to increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Agencies should be working together to maximize the impact of Federal and state funding, share research, evaluate policies, and engage in joint initiatives that can drive national outcomes. However, agencies face the challenge of being unable to identify peers who might offer valuable insights or share cost-effective solutions.

Background

Some of the distinct differences in agency operation and provision of services can include the following:

- **The structure of the agency within the state:** This can include General, Blind, or Combined Agencies. This could also include being a designated state agency or a designated state unit. Another factor is where the agency falls within the state structure. For instance, some states house the VR agencies within Labor/Workforce, Social/Human Services, Education, or Disability Services while other states may have a standalone rehabilitation agency and/or independent commission. These factors can determine who is served and how the service is provided within the state.
- **The State Plan**: Each state is required to create a State Plan that outlines what they are doing to help with barriers to employment. There are required Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) partners who are included in each state plan; however,

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combined plans can include additional partners. This may vary based on how an agency is structured and within which state agency they may be housed.

- **State Laws:** State laws may include the qualifications of VR counselors and other personnel standards for VR professionals. Additionally, state procurement laws and regulations often differ drastically and can be more restrictive than Federal regulations.
- **Demographics of the State:** This could include population, population density (e.g., rural, urban), labor market statistics and resources of employers. The variance of these factors creates differing challenges for states.
- **Personnel:** This could include differences in counselor positions/levels, other positions within the agency that support the VR process, remote/virtual work and service delivery, level of experience with VR, and turnover with executive leadership. The methods and resources used in training new and current staff can vary from state to state, including the use of learning management systems and other tools.
- **Service Delivery:** This category could include many different factors. Eligibility criteria, order of selection (OOS), policies within the state regarding services and vendors, business services and working with employers, transition services and working with schools, independent living services, and assistive technology services are just some of the variations that can exist within states serving people with disabilities. In addition, some states provide services in-house (by staff) while many states deliver services through contracts with Community Resource Providers (CRPs).
- **Case Management and Data Collection***:* Each state collects the same data to report each quarter and year. However, how it is collected is up to each individual state. Data can be gathered in a variety of methods, including through the use of case management systems. There are many aspects of case management to consider for each state, including the use of electronic case files, requirements and means of record retention, ensuring the confidentiality of personally identifiable information (PII), the use of Artificial Intelligence, and other tools/resources.
- **Fiscal/Funding***:* The amount of funding each state receives varies along with the ways in which they choose to use it. Some state legislatures eagerly support the requirement for state matching funds, while others struggle to meet the match. There are so many considerations when it comes to the VR grant, including how the agency works within its own unit, how the "program" and "fiscal" aspects interact, and ensuring compliance grant rules, Federal regulations, and state fiscal regulations. A particular challenge for some states can involve the complexities of expending funds according to Federal regulations and state procurement regulations.

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Proposed Changes

Cross-pollination is the natural process by which one plant fertilizes another through various means, leading to the exchange of vital resources and genetic material. Similarly, VR agencies can thrive through the cross-pollination of ideas and information between organizations. By cultivating better communication and information-sharing, agencies can improve the services and outcomes provided to individuals with disabilities, as well as saving time and resources spent on research.

Currently, structured avenues like **Communities of Practice (CoPs)**, organized through the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM), and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) provide opportunities for this kind of cross-pollination. With seven CoPs available, agencies can collaborate on broad topics ranging from Fiscal Management to Customized Employment. These CoPs have been instrumental in allowing agencies to share knowledge and learn from one another's experiences.

Semi-annual conferences organized by CSAVR and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) can also be a way to connect with other agency leadership. Although valuable, CoPs are somewhat limited, focusing primarily on issues that affect many agencies, while there may be limited attendance to conferences due to budget constraints.

To expand opportunities for collaboration with all VR leaders, there need to be additional methods for information dissemination and engagement that reach beyond the executive level. One potential solution is to develop **a shared database** that includes basic details about each agency's structure, services, contacts, and other helpful information. This could be implemented as a "wiki" or "knowledgebase," a web-based resource that would house and provide easy access to information about VR agencies such as, but not limited to, the size, structure, services offered, policies, tools, challenges faced, innovative approaches to service delivery. This resource would be accessible to all leadership levels within the VR agencies.

Other information that could be incorporated includes **RSA sub-regulatory guidance** (current Technical Assistance Circulars [TAC], Policy Directives [PD], Program Assistance Circulars [PAC], Dear Colleague Letters [DCL], and Frequently Asked Questions [FAQ]). Federal and state statutes and regulations along with State Plans could also be incorporated. This would provide a one-stop location for an enormous amount of information and resources that are currently scattered across many Federal, state, and local websites or housed as "institutional knowledge" within agencies.

To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of retrieving information, searches could be performed using **artificial intelligence (AI) tools** that would help agencies discover connections

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and resources they might otherwise overlook. AI tools could also help agencies more easily explore their similarities and differences in structure, service provision, challenges faced, and solutions implemented. Using safe, secure, and trustworthy AI can support our agencies' leaders, become literate in AI, and model responsible and innovative AI use.

A **discretionary grant** is a potential solution. This grant money could be designated towards a project to develop and implement this tool. The funding is key to initiate set-up and maintenance for an up-to-date and reliable tool. This request could be rolled into the current grant applications for technical assistance or a separate discretionary grant could be created to meet this need.

This solution would allow agencies to connect more easily with others who have expertise in specific areas. Furthermore, agencies could be encouraged to produce brief informational videos that highlight innovative projects or successful initiatives, offering others a chance to adopt or adapt these ideas to their own contexts.

Impact

By cultivating a culture of cross-pollination, VR agencies can create a dynamic, interconnected system that not only reduces redundancy and conserves valuable resources but drives significant improvements in service delivery and outcomes for individuals with disabilities. At its core, this collaborative approach cultivates a shared sense of purpose and collective problem-solving across state boundaries, allowing agencies to leverage each other's expertise, innovations, and experiences. The broader impact of such collaboration is profound and multifaceted:

Reducing Redundancy and conserving Resources: Creating spaces for agencies to share knowledge, tools, and research findings can significantly reduce duplication. Agencies no longer need to "reinvent the wheel" each time they encounter a challenge. Instead, they can quickly identify, adapt, and adopt proven strategies and solutions from other states, thus saving time, money, and effort. This leads to a more efficient use of resources—whether fiscal, technological, or human—and accelerates the pace at which effective solutions can be implemented.

Improving Service Delivery: Collaboration across agencies can also directly enhance the quality and effectiveness of service delivery. When agencies share successful program models, promising practices, and lessons learned from their own experiences, it enables others to replicate and adapt those approaches to their own local contexts. This kind of knowledge exchange promotes the continuous improvement of service delivery practices, particularly when it comes to customizing services to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Sharing

best practices ensures that agencies are not working in isolation but are continuously learning from each other and applying new and innovative ideas to improve their programs.

Breaking Down Silos and Encouraging Cross-State Learning: One of the most significant barriers to effective collaboration in the current system is the siloed nature of VR agencies. While agencies may operate within the same Federal framework, they are often isolated from one another due to differences in state laws and regulations, organizational structures, or local needs. This siloed structure prevents the free flow of information and inhibits cross-state learning.

Cultivating a culture of cross-pollination helps break down these barriers by creating a space where agencies can learn from each other, regardless of their structural differences. By creating opportunities for cross-state collaboration, VR agencies can learn from the successes and failures of others, adapt solutions to their own contexts, and innovate faster than they could in isolation. This culture of learning can ultimately lead to a more adaptive and responsive VR system that can better meet the evolving needs of individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion

The proposed approach of cultivating a culture of cross-pollination holds the potential to address many of the challenges faced by VR agencies. Improving communication, collaboration, and information sharing will create a more interconnected system that reduces redundancy, accelerates the adoption of best practices, and enhances the overall quality of services provided to individuals with disabilities. The continuation of platforms such as CoPs, the CSAVR/NCSAB conferences, and the creation of shared databases and other informational resources can bridge gaps between agencies, promote innovation, and encourage the adaptation of successful models across state lines. Ultimately, a more collaborative, resource-efficient VR system will empower agencies to meet the evolving needs of individuals with disabilities more effectively, ensuring that Federal and state investments lead to meaningful and measurable improvements in employment outcomes and quality of life for this population. Through the cross-pollination of ideas, resources, and expertise, VR agencies can collectively have a greater impact, cultivating a future where individuals with disabilities have more access to opportunities and support than ever before.

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