EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

To: Extended Employment Providers
From: Kim Babine, Lonie Goldsberry, and Amanda Jensen-Stahl
Date: 10/15/2019
Re: Summary of 2019 EE Program Visits

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Overview

Extended Employment (EE) Program visits with each provider were conducted between 2/6/19 – 6/19/19. There are twenty-seven EE providers across the state offering unique services to various populations of individuals with disabilities. Providers are situated across the state serving various geographic regions. Each provider has their own intake process, disability-specific service models, and various staffing capacities. Some EE providers offer specific expertise serving individuals with the following disabilities:

- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Serious and Persistent Mental Illness
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Intellectual Disability

EE is a state funded program that provides long term employment support services to individuals with disabilities. Each year approximately 4,500 individuals are served by the twenty-seven current EE providers across the state. Grant amounts for each provider vary between $62,000 and $2,000,000 per year. EE Providers receive individual referrals from a variety of sources: VR, county services, self-referrals, employers, and others. In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2019, the EE budget was $13 million dollars, and the State of Minnesota was fortunate to receive legislative increase of $2 million dollars for SFY 2020.

"EE feels more client focused and you are spending your time talking about the person – more person-centered"

Goal of Visits

DEED-EE staff (DEED) wanted to learn more about how providers build relationships with the individual they serve including how EE support plans are written, how long-term employment supports are provided, what type of supports are provided, and how case files are documented. The visits served as a learning and exploration opportunity for DEED to get a better understanding of the unique and individualized services each provider offers. These visits did not replicate EE compliance examination and does not constitute any kind of a determination regarding EE grant allocations. For each visit, DEED spent the day at the provider's preferred location, interviewed leadership staff, direct service staff, and reviewed file documentation. DEED had a list of open-ended questions intended to encourage discussion and allow DEED to gain a deep understanding of each provider's EE program.

Conversational Interviews
- What is the referral process (receipt, assignment, etc.) and from where do referrals come?
- Describe the intake process. Who are key stakeholders?
- How are employment support plans developed and documented? Who participates?
- How do you build relationships with the individuals that you serve?
    - Where and when do you meet them?
    - How do you get them to talk to you about work?
    - What levels of disclosure do individuals prefer?
    - What are your best practices for case noting?
    - How do you know when they are ready to transition off EE services?
- What do you like about this work? Do you have any favorite success stories?
- What challenges or barriers do you face? What can DEED do to better support your ability to serve individuals in the Extended Employment program?
- How are your case files documented?
    - Are case files electronic, paper, or a combination of both? Do you utilize a case management software?
    - What is your process for documentation?
    - What are some samples of documentation? Can these be shared with other providers?
    - Who does the documenting?
    - What oversight and/or quality checks do you implement for EE documentation?

“You have to be flexible in EE”

Common Themes

Based on the notes DEED took during the twenty-seven visits, the following were identified as common, consistent themes across providers.

Monthly Visits: EE service staff (provider staff that deliver EE services) are open and flexible to meeting people where and when they prefer – at the worksite or in the community at a coffee shop, library, etc. Staff noted that sometimes it can be difficult to get two visits in per month and inquired about options for technology like Skype or FaceTime for visits in the future.

Relationship Building: Building trust with the individuals EE providers serve is critical to delivering effective EE supports. Trust is built by meeting consistency, discovering and sharing individual interests, allowing time for personal discussion before moving on to work related topics, and EE service staff's flexibility and availability. When asking questions, there is a balance between open-ended questions intended to encourage discussion and engagement and asking very specific questions when needing to dig deeper into related employment and/or personal issues that may be affecting employment. Avoid asking simple questions such as, "How is work going?" that elicit simple answers, "It's good." EE service staff did however discuss the importance of setting professional boundaries with individuals while building rapport; while there is a focus on getting to know the person, it is done in a respectful and professional manner.

Person-Centered: EE providers demonstrate person-centered practices by looking at each person and all aspects of their life by providing holistic, wrap-around services to meet individual needs. In many cases, employment support per se is only one aspect of the EE services provided and received. EE Providers can step in and assist an individual in all aspects of their lives to help them maintain employment. DEED heard from EE providers the importance of serving someone in the manner that they want to be served, including but not limited to where and when they want to meet, the shape and progress of goals, and whether they want to meet more than twice month (depending on the level of support needed).

Case Notes: Case notes capture the details of in-person visits and the ongoing supports being provided to an individual. Case notes varied greatly in their detail and frequency across providers. Many EE providers only case note the in-person visits and leave out any between contacts like phone calls, emails, or texts. Timing for entering case notes was not consistent among providers and EE service staff. While many providers had policy on deadlines for entering case notes, DEED found that some case notes were entered anywhere from immediately following a meeting up to weeks after the meeting took place; for example, by the end of the month. There were also notable differences in how EE providers case note for individuals being served in Supported Employment (SE) versus Community Employment (CE) or Center-based Employment (CBE). For example, SE visits were reflected in case notes, but CE and CBE visits were often reflected through attendance sheets or other methods.

Plan and Goal Development: EE support plans reviewed were specific and unique to each organization. Goals were included and updated annually as part of each support plan. Goal development varies greatly across providers, but highlights included specific reference to an individual's functional limitation and strategies to address potential barriers such as role playing, creating scripts, reinforcement, and working directly with employers.

Benefits: Many individuals being served by EE receive social security benefits. EE providers noted that many individuals want the surety of SS benefits and shared examples of individuals turning down promotional opportunities like more work hours or higher pay in order to remain on those benefits.

Paystubs: Some providers noted that paystubs can be challenging to obtain, but now that many are available electronically, it is getting easier. There are a variety of ways that paystubs are obtained: picking someone up on pay day, accessing their online account, getting payroll information directly from the employer, supplying self-addressed stamped envelopes, and/or the person emailing/dropping them off. One benefit noted to collecting paystubs is that EE providers can help an individual report their earnings to Social Security if they have that requirement, so it is an incentive to the person to turn their paystubs in to the provider. One provider commented that an individual came back for copies of their paystubs to attain a car loan, for example. This example demonstrates the holistic approach used by many providers.

Ending or Exiting EE Services: EE services with an individual are reviewed on an annual and in many cases, semiannual basis and providers view an individual exiting services as a positive thing. Many providers noted that they simply have conversations with individuals when they notice that individuals do not have new goals to work on, do not have much to discuss during monthly visits, or start missing meetings on a regular basis. EE providers also noted that when they refer to exiting EE services as "graduating" it can help someone transition off services because it is viewed as a positive thing and highlights the fact that they have achieved their employment support goals. All providers offer the ability for individuals to come back in the future if EE supports are needed. Some providers require a re-application process and others have an open-door policy.

Employers: Building relationships with employers is a critical component of EE services when someone wants an EE provider to interact with their employer. EE service staff indicated that they meet with managers/supervisors of the individual they are supporting on a regular basis to determine if there are any issues and work directly with employers to resolve those issues. EE service staff noted that it can be helpful to get the employer's perspective as the individuals they are supporting don't always report issues directly to them. EE service staff also indicated that employers value the support that EE services provides and that having that additional support is an asset to the individual's success. In some cases, it was reported that employers rely too heavily on EE service staff.

EE Direct Service Staff: EE service staff across the state are dedicated, passionate, and knowledgeable about the services and supports they are providing. "I love my job" and "I love seeing people succeed" were consistently heard from provider staff. DEED noted that many providers have long tenures of employment within the organization. On the other hand, it was also noted that hiring new qualified staff can be a challenge, consistent with a tight labor market, making it difficult to expand services.

Transportation: Transportation consistently came up as a barrier among EE providers. It can be difficult for people to get to competitive, integrated jobs in the community, particularly in greater Minnesota, if they don't have access to reliable transportation and EE does not pay for transportation services. There were a couple of providers who regardless provide transportation to competitive, integrated employment sites, although raising financial and staffing challenges.

Two In-person Visits: Every provider expressed that the two in-person meetings per month required by the EE Rule were difficult at times to conduct due to people's schedule, weather, and transportation barriers. As previously noted, there was strong interest in virtual options to carry out some of the visits.

Financial: Many providers reported recent financial challenges in their ability to provide and expand EE services. Challenges originate from a variety of sources and due to the changing landscape of delivering services to individuals with disabilities. Examples include changes in DHS waiver programs, the United Way funding model, and the newly implemented requirements of the Extended Employment Rule.

"The EE support plan is a guide and we use it a lot to guide on-going conversations and meetings"

Best Practices and Recommendations for Providers

1. Enrolling in EE
   - Some providers enroll individuals in EE as soon as they are placed in a competitive, integrated environment even if when the final PBA milestone remains. Others wait for 90 days of successful employment before enrolling in EE. DEED encourages providers to utilize EE funding that will help them continue to deliver services to more individuals and reminds providers that there is no conflict of interest or concerns of double-dipping between the PBA and EE funds.

2. Goal Development
   - When developing goals, consider how the functional limitations may impact the individual's ability to meet goals. Include strategies to mitigate any negative consequences to goal attainment.
   - Add goal prompts such as "I want to *XYZ* or I will achieve *the goal* by doing *XYZ*" and include specific strategies to address the identified goal beyond just maintaining employment.
   - Identify specific needs that an individual has and develop goals based on those needs.
   - Utilize tools like SMART goals and Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques to assist with goal development.

3. Case Notes
   - Include specific reference to where staff are meeting individuals. For example, "Employment Consultant met with *Name* at *Location* on *Date*. Staff and *Name* discussed *XYZ*…" and make it clear that it is an in-person meeting. Some case notes reviewed were ambiguous regarding mode of contact, location, and topics discussed.
   - Provide more detail in the case notes on what occurred during the visit. This could include reference to work and progress on goals, issues at work, and other details of what is being discussed during a meeting. Many case notes were very brief and did not include substantive information. DEED learned that when EE service staff review previous notes prior to meeting individuals, the result often is a more valuable in-person meeting. In addition, detailed notes make it easier when support services are transitioned to different EE service staff or when staff substitution is required.
   - Utilize cell phone features like voice memos for dictating notes after a meeting in the car before heading to the next meeting. Some EE service staff reported that they dictate directly into OneNote, Outlook, or other similar applications where audio is transcribed and documents date, time, and location of such meeting. Utilization of such strategies may result in time savings, efficiency, and better-quality notes.

4. Disclosure Documentation
   - Identify on EE support plan whether the person has decided to disclose or not disclose disability-related information to the employer. Level of disclosure and how those supports will be provided in conjunction with disclosure should also be included.
   - Pros and cons of disclosure should be reviewed on an ongoing basis as an individual's disclosure preferences can change over time.

5. EE Paperwork Checklist
   - Many EE providers have multiple funding streams that include different paperwork requirements such as 245D licensing. Some providers have separate paperwork requirements for each of their funding sources, and others combine all requirements into one set of documents. A couple of providers created EE documentation checklists for their staff to ensure that all EE rule requirements are met. This is a practice DEED highly encourages for training new EE service staff and attaining EE compliance.

6. Case Review and Service Oversight
   - During case review, DEED found that several providers exercised very little oversight over paperwork and/or regular review of case files. Potentially, this may contribute to inconsistencies found in case noting, and goal and plan development. There were a few providers who implemented practices of peer audits, manager review of plans, team meetings to discuss cases, and/or random case note review. Where such procedures were employed, case files were robust in information and helped DEED get a great understanding of the unique individual being served. DEED encourages providers to consider implementing some quality control measures to highlight the good work that is being done at each provider location.

"Love my job, every day is different, the individuals served are all different and unique. Get a smile on my face when I am talking about my job"

Recommendations for DEED

1. Training for Providers
   - Functional Limitations - EE providers indicated that they would greatly benefit from training on how to identify and document functional limitations.
   - Goals – EE providers indicated that it would be helpful to have training on writing better, more specific and individualized goals. In addition, they would like to see some good examples of other provider's goal documentation.

2. Annual EE Meetings
   - EE providers shared that they would like to have regular meetings with DEED-EE staff and other EE providers to receive updates, training, and sharing of best practices with other EE providers. Many providers referenced annual EE meetings that used to occur and would like to see those return.

3. Virtual Visits
   - EE providers all indicated periodic challenges of completing two in-person visits in each month. It is requested that DEED looks at possible technology options such as Skype, FaceTime, and other virtual options in place of some required in-person visits. There was consensus amongst EE providers that virtual visits should not supplant face-to-face visits but allows flexibility when there are bad weather conditions, long travel distances, and/or individual meeting preferences.