

WorkStrides

A Career Development Program for Clients with the Most Significant Challenges to Employment

Project Narrative

The Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) has always viewed its mission as providing services that enhance clients' quality-of-life through employment. During the last couple of years our thinking has shifted to understanding the importance of helping our clients to develop assets so that they can become - and remain - economically self-sufficient. This is not the traditional perspective of Public Rehabilitation. However as we became actively involved in assisting our counselors and clients to increase employment outcomes and client control of their rehabilitation process it was a natural evolution to think in terms of economic self-sufficiency. Our counselors are expanding their role to assist clients with the most significant disabilities to become employed and ultimately achieve economic self-sufficiency. Washington State DVR clearly understands a job, even a career, is not magic. It does not solve the array of barriers individuals who are poor and/or disabled face: poor credit, limitations on assets, predatory lending, public benefits complexities, inadequate medical insurance and poor money management skills. All of these barriers make economic achievement extremely difficult for a person with a disability. These realities made us want to try new and different strategies to increase our clients' success and decrease our recidivism rate. We wanted to implement strategies that can enhance clients becoming economically self-sufficient.

Employment for persons with the most significant disabilities has challenged the rehabilitation field as well as the generic workforce system ever since the issue gained national importance in the early 1990's. The 1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provide a clear mandate that employment services should first be available to those with the most significant impact of disabilities. As the economy struggled and funding decreased, this mandate has caused many states over the last decade to implement an "order of selection". Order of selection ensures access to and focus on persons with the most significant impact of disability. Washington State DVR has been in an order of selection since November 2000 and currently has a waitlist of over twelve thousand individuals.

Each year, DVR provides vocational rehabilitation services to approximately 12,000 people with disabilities to help them obtain or maintain employment.

Order of selection has resulted in a refocusing of services. Currently over 95% of the clients served by DVR are prioritized as having a significant or most significant disability. Traditional vocational rehabilitation services are inadequate due to the increased employment challenges that these clients face. Compounding these challenges is the increased complexity of today's world

of work. Vocational rehabilitation counselors need new ways of dealing with the barriers to employment and ultimate lack of economic self-sufficiency their clients face. Dramatic changes are occurring in society, education, work, leisure, and demographics. To help clients reach the goal of economic self-sufficiency vocational rehabilitation professionals must look at the career development process very differently. Liptak (2001) suggests that traditional theories of career development rely on a “linear, rational matching of people and jobs” and are no longer adequate. The development and implementation of career development programs for people with disabilities can be an effective method in addressing the unique issues arising from their disabilities (Enright, Conyers & Szymanski, 1996).

Increasing employment outcomes for clients with significant and the most significant disabilities will require the development of innovative rehabilitation techniques and advanced training for vocational rehabilitation counselors.

DVR is seeking funding to develop and disseminate an innovative approach to empower individuals with significant and most significant disabilities to maximize employment, achieve economic self sufficiency, independence, and to realize full inclusion and integration into society. Three specific outcomes will be realized with grant funding:

- Development and piloting of a six week career development program to assist clients with the most significant disabilities to learn how to engage in self appraisal and vocational exploration, use resources to include work incentives, make career-related decisions and choices, obtain employment, apply for jobs, and cope with work adjustment problems.
- Infusion of specific training in managing group process, facilitation skills, benefits planning, work incentives and job seeking and placement strategies into the core training program to ensure all staff are trained in the techniques that are developed
- Support and training to replicate the job seeking and work incentives techniques throughout the state.

Nature and Scope of Training Program

Although relatively little is known about career development processes in the lives of people with disabilities, it is clear that people with disabilities encounter a variety of challenges and barriers to career development. They experience an increased level of low self-esteem, limited early life experiences, social stigma, a restricted range of available occupations, few successful role models (Enright, 1997; Hershenson & Szymanski, 1992), lack of confidence in decision making (Enright, 1997; Curnow, 1989), difficulties finding employment, and a predisposition for experiencing career indecision (Enright, 1997; Tseng, 1992). These factors significantly reduce employment outcomes and economic self sufficiency for persons served in the public VR program.

Szymanski and Hanley-Maxwell (1996) suggest that, “Despite these barriers, a disability, in and of itself, does not determine career development, but is more accurately perceived as a risk factor potentially influencing career development.”

Although there is little research that has been conducted exploring the effectiveness of career development programs, the data that is available suggests that people with disabilities benefit from career development programs (Enright, 1997; Conyers, 1995; Ericson & Riordan, 1993; Farley, Bolton & Parkerson, 1992). The data also suggests that intensive, well-formulated career development programs can enhance people with disability’s self-esteem and life decision-making self-efficacy (Enright, 1997).

Traditional career development methods work quite successfully for thousands of people but they have proven unsuccessful for people with complex disability issues who experience a combination of significant physical and cognitive barriers to employment. DVR plans to develop a career development program that directly addresses the needs of the most significantly disabled in providing meaningful experiences that contribute to developing self-esteem, employment and ultimately economic self sufficiency. These experiences empower customers with significant disabilities to become involved in and take ownership of their career development process. The goal of the exercises and experiences built into our program is to promote strength and confidence in decision making self-efficacy, which is a powerful key to successful lifelong career management and economic self sufficiency. We haven chosen the name *WorkStrides* for our program. *WorkStrides* is based on positive psychology theory and the Dependable Strengths process developed by Dr. Bernard Haldane in 1947 at The Harvard Business School. The Dependable Strengths process has been used successfully with the hard core unemployed and in areas of few employment opportunities. Dr. Haldane is widely considered to be the "Father of Career Counseling". Core to the Dependable Strengths process is the concept of learned optimism and articulating strengths which addresses people with disability’s low self-esteem and life decision-making self-efficacy.

WorkStrides blends group career development techniques with the Dependable Strengths process. Participants in the *WorkStrides* program will meet three hours, three times a week in a supportive group environment. During this time period the participants will be developing a portfolio. The portfolio will be divided into four sections. The first section will contain personal information regarding values and beliefs, learning style, personality style, interests, health information, work experience, etc. Section two will include identification of strengths and career exploration information gathered through various activities. The third section will be focused on work characteristics, personal characteristics, career options, etc. In the last section, they will be pulling all the pieces together and put together a plan of action. They will document goals and begin working on the steps of their plan of action with their vocational rehabilitation counselor.

The *WorkStrides* program will serve DVR clients who are ready to begin development of an individual plan for employment. Referral to the program will come from a variety of sources including self-referrals and counselor referrals. The *WorkStrides* option will be presented as part of the menu of services in the DVR new client orientation. Once a referral to the *WorkStrides* program is made, the *WorkStrides* team leader will meet with the client to explain the services available through program and the expectations connected with participation in the program. The client will continue to meet with their assigned vocational rehabilitation counselor to complete development of their individual plan for employment.

Goal One: Clients exiting DVR will have a developed path to increase economic self sufficiency.

Objective 1: Develop and implement *WorkStrides* curriculum by June 31, 2006

Status and rationale:

We have found through research that there is a paucity of career development curriculums that address the specific needs of our clients. We have also learned through experience that the curriculum will require frequent revisions or updating to ensure we are meeting the needs of our clients. Therefore, we feel it is important to develop the curriculum internally. A curriculum development team has been formed to initiate development of the *WorkStrides* program curriculum. Team membership includes staff skilled in Dependable Strengths, curriculum development, career development models and utilization of work incentives. Targeted kickoff for curriculum development is October 2005. The *WorkStrides* program will be piloted at four DVR offices. To ensure success in the development of an effective curriculum the DVR will be partnering with the Region X Rehabilitation Continuing Education program and the Center for Dependable Strengths at Highline Community College and the University of Washington.

Objective 2: Increase employment outcomes by ten percent by involving clients in the *WorkStrides* program.

Status and rationale:

Washington State has the fourth highest unemployment in the nation at 6.3%, and in some parts of the state the unemployment rate is 8% (U.S DOL Bureau of labor Statistics). Currently over 95% of clients served by the Division are categorized as having significant or most significant challenges to employment. We anticipate that clients completing the *WorkStrides* program will have a 10% higher rate of employment than similar clients served in the traditional DVR program due to increased level of self esteem and a supportive group environment.

Objective 3: Increase client knowledge of work incentives and the of the impact of employment on benefits

Status and rationale:

Work incentives offered by Social Security and other programs are very underutilized by clients in public vocational rehabilitation programs. Benefits planning and specific training on maximizing use of work incentives will be a key component of the *WorkStrides* program.

Goal Two: Implement the WorkStrides program throughout DVR

Objective 1: The *WorkStrides* program will be replicated in six DVR offices prior to October 2008.

Status and rationale:

A week-long *WorkStrides* training session facilitated by certified trainers will be provided twice a year for staff involved in replicating the *WorkStrides* program in their office. A mentoring program will be available to project staff. This mentoring program will build upon an established mentoring program that DVR already offers to its staff. DVR's Leadership and Mentoring Program Administrator will coordinate the mentoring training and support. The purpose of this mentoring program will be to expand project staff's knowledge base about the *WorkStrides* program and issues related to program replication. Mentors will come from staff that have worked in the *WorkStrides* program previously. Individuals will self-select their mentor. To become a mentor or protégé, individuals must attend formal mentoring training after which they will develop a plan outlining what support and information the mentor would provide, and what the protégé will learn from the mentor.

Objective 2: Disseminate information on the *WorkStrides* program to expose staff to *WorkStrides* principles and to increase referrals to the program.

Status and rationale:

Introducing a new program is a difficult task, since anything new is likely to be suspect and there are various institutional resistances to any requirement for change in schedules, staff roles and relationships, and program rhythms. A day long *WorkStrides* training program will be developed to expose DVR staff and WorkSource partner agencies to the principles of *WorkStrides* and how to make referrals to the program.

This training will become part of the quarterly DVR new employee core training program and will be presented other times as requested. *WorkStrides* will be presented as an option at new client orientations. *WorkStrides* program staff will also present the model and supporting research at national rehabilitation conferences.

PLAN OF OPERATION

WorkStrides is a curriculum that combines activities and experiences of personal reflection, group discussion, role play, and research into local job and training opportunities, with the opportunity for participants to develop foundational skills such as self-awareness, self-confidence, self-advocacy, critical thinking, and decision-making. Many *WorkStrides* activities are designed to be done in groups. Participants have the opportunity to learn from their own and each other's experiences, and also to practice problem-solving and goal achievement while working as part of a team. Teamwork is a skill that is increasingly important in today's work world, and has been identified by employers as a critical skill in the workplace. Many individuals with significant disabilities have lived with some degree of social stigma and isolation. The opportunity to experience one's own value as a team member is invaluable. The opportunity to develop and experience courage while articulating one's dependable strengths is life-altering. *WorkStrides* is built around several assumptions about teaching and principles of adult learning:

- the starting point is the learner
- the content of the class is drawn from, and guided by, the daily experiences of the learners
- the facilitator is also a learner whose role is to facilitate a participatory research process with students
- what is learned and how it is learned can teach:
 - a view of the world
 - a sense of self-confidence
 - the ability to think critically
 - the courage to confront difficult communication situations, and
 - the skills needed to solve daily problems, individually and collectively
 - a variety of participatory techniques help learners participate more actively in class
 - learning should be fun!

WorkStrides is designed to involve participants in learning experiences that will help them discover their own values, needs and skills, and how they might fulfill their employment needs more readily once they have identified their dependable strengths. At the same time, participants will learn foundational skills. These skills enable people to use their experiences to succeed in what they set out to do, and include:

- critical thinking
- decision-making
- self-awareness

- self-confidence
- self-advocacy
- assertiveness
- organizational skills
- goal setting and planning skills
- teamwork
- problem solving in personal and public situations

This project will be part of the Washington State DVR Human Resource Development (HRD) program. Statewide coordination of all training activities is provided by the Human Resources Development Program Manager (HRD) with consultation from the agency Chiefs Team. Specific duties of the HRD Program Manager include: identification of training needs, development of statewide training, development and maintenance of the Division 's core training program and the development and implementation of an annual agency-wide training plan. Training activities are coordinated with the DVR Strategic Plan and in consultation with the Rehabilitation Council. The project coordinator will lead the development and implementation of the *WorkStrides* model and is responsible for project activities and project replication. The project coordinator will work closely with the project director to ensure consistency with other agency training programs and the DVR staff trainer to ensure that agency staff and rehabilitation partners are trained in *WorkStrides*. The Dependable Strengths subject matter experts will assist the project coordinator in the development of the curriculum and will be available for consultation throughout the period of the grant.

Goal One: Clients exiting DVR will have a developed path to increase economic self sufficiency

Objective 1: Develop and implement *WorkStrides* curriculum by June 31, 2006

Method

1. Complete the six week *WorkStrides* curriculum
2. Develop an evaluation and data analysis strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the *WorkStrides* model and Dependable strengths techniques for use with clients with significant disabilities
3. Select four DVR field offices to pilot the *WorkStrides* program
4. Train DVR counseling staff in the pilot sites to implement the *WorkStrides* curriculum and evaluation techniques
5. Pilot staff will meet monthly with a mentor to gain skills in the *WorkStrides* program

Objective 2: Increase employment outcomes by ten percent by involving clients in the WorkStrides program.

Method:

1. Fifty clients will complete the *WorkStrides* program at each site during the pilot.
2. Employment information will be collected at time of case closure for each *WorkStrides* program participant to determine rehabilitation outcome
3. Collect pre and post evaluation data to assess effectiveness of the *WorkStrides* program

Objective 3: Increase client knowledge of work incentives and the of the impact of employment on benefits.

Method:

1. Each *WorkStrides* participant will complete a Social Security benefits query to identify potential impact employment could have on their benefits.
2. Each *WorkStrides* session will include a section on work incentives and the impact of employment on benefits

Goal Two: Implement the WorkStrides program throughout DVR

Objective 1: The *WorkStrides* program will be replicated at seven DVR offices prior to October 2008

Method:

1. Develop replication guide including curriculum with implementation notes and training DVD.
2. Offices desiring to be a *WorkStrides* site will be assessed to determine if they meet replication site standards
3. Train DVR counseling staff in pilot sites to implement the *WorkStrides* curriculum and evaluation techniques
4. Staff from each replication site will meet monthly with a mentor to gain skills in the *WorkStrides* program

Objective 2: Disseminate information on the *WorkStrides* program to expose staff to *WorkStrides* principles and to increase referrals to the program.

Method:

1. A day long *WorkStrides* training program will be held twice a year to expose DVR staff to the principles of *WorkStrides* and how to make referrals to the program
2. Information on the *WorkStrides* program will become part of all new client orientations
3. Training on *WorkStrides* techniques will become part of the DVR core training program.
4. The *WorkStrides* curriculum and training DVD will be presented at one national conference to enhance nationwide distribution and replication of the program

Budget

<i>WorkStrides</i>			
	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Project Coordinator	30308	30308	
Travel Travel by WorkStrides team to support pilot sites	1400	2800	60616
Employment Readiness Scale- client assessment (50 assessments @ \$34 per assessment) = \$1700 x 4 pilot sites = \$3400 per year	3400	3400	6800
Training on Dep. Strengths* for project staff: 18 staff @ \$250 per person = \$4500	4500	0	4500
Trainer Certification**	1000	0	1000
Supplies: client notebook & misc. (100 clients/ year @ \$50 per client)	5000	5000	10000
Model Replication/Dissemination		3534	
Total	45608	45042	90650

*All future training will be done by DVR trained DVR staff

**Certification for three DVR staff as Dependable Strengths trainers. Once certified we will provide the Dependable Strengths training at no cost to DVR.