

Innovations in Postsecondary Education and Training: The Case for Community-Based Rehabilitation Centers¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a national assessment of the technical assistance needs of community-based rehabilitation centers that provide employment services to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. The study was designed to parallel the Postsecondary Educational Program Network's (PEPNet) national needs assessment of college programs providing training to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. The purpose of the study was to identify and prioritize the types of resources, support, and technical assistance required to enhance services delivered by community-based agencies to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Recommendations for future technical assistance strategies based on the study are presented.

Most service providers who work in rehabilitation or postsecondary training understand that the world of work has significantly changed. The 21st century is here! Productivity is up, the stock market is up, and the workplace has exploded with new technology that demands a new breed of future worker. Workers must be skilled in many areas: literacy, adaptability and problem solving,

communication and teamwork, leadership, and technological sophistication.

Many of these areas present major challenges for deaf and hard of hearing persons preparing for a career. Reading and writing are primary in that only 15 percent of deaf students reads at a 6th grade level. Manufacturing and physical labor jobs, areas where this population has been traditionally successful, are no longer readily available. In fact, many of these jobs have been replaced by technology. People need to be adaptive and respond to these changes as well as become skilled in problem solving which includes communication and teamwork. Leadership skills and the ability to be self-directed is important. Deaf and hard of hearing workers have to be prepared to succeed in this rapidly changing workplace.

The key to success is training, training that is provided in a broad range of settings that go beyond the rehabilitation center or the postsecondary program. We all have to work together with deaf and hard of hearing individuals to assist them in having an equal shot at success. We need to expand access to a full range of postsecondary training opportunities. Analyzing 1997 data on education of deaf and hard of hearing persons, we find that persons vary in terms of their need for special-

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ized training. For example, 2,300 benefit from postsecondary training defined as college and university programs. Approximately, 3,500 are more qualified for vocational training. Finally, 2,000 benefitted from community-based employment training. Unfortunately, much of this training occurs in programs that lack significant resources to serve these individuals.

A great deal of information has been collected recently to look at the needs for technical assistance and resources needed by traditional postsecondary programs. Previously, PEPNet conducted a national survey that targeted almost 10,000 colleges and proprietary schools (Hopkins & Walter, 1998). By design, this study did not assess the needs of community based employment training centers. To complete the picture, the University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing was asked to conduct a parallel study to the PEPNet national needs assessment. This survey targeted around 800 centers using a data collec-

tion instrument that was similar to the one used by the national PEPNet survey.

The rationale for this study is that a large percentage of the population do not go to college. For those who do start college, an estimated 75% of deaf college students drop out without completing a degree (Stinson & Walter, 1997). They obtain needed employment training from a variety of community-based employment training programs. Yet, little is known about these programs and their needs for technical assistance. We asked what kind of employment related services were provided. We asked about the resources used to provide these services and the numbers of individuals served. Equally important is the employment outcomes achieved by individuals served by these programs. Do they obtain jobs — *good* jobs with benefits, opportunities for promotion, and long-term employment? Finally, we wanted to determine the types of resources and technical assistance that would be helpful to these programs.

The study started with a total of 968 programs, of which 452 responded (46.6%). As may be seen in Figure 1, the programs that responded were geographically distributed across all four PEPNet regions. However, proportionally fewer survey responses were received from community-based programs located in the West.

Figure One: Community Sample.



Results

The sections that follow present snapshots of some of the key findings. For more in depth analyses, readers can obtain the web-based technical report (Boone & Watson, 1999).

Overall, these programs served large numbers of persons with various disabilities. The mean number of persons served was 1,972.3 (SD=7512). However, this large standard deviation indicates these programs are varied in size. Of the programs that responded, almost all indicated that they currently serve or plan to serve persons who are deaf or hard of hearing (97.7%). Only 2.3 percent of the programs did not have current plans to serve this population. This is a very positive finding. There are significant opportunities for service available. Yet, when we begin to assess the number of deaf or hard of hearing individuals served, these numbers decrease to an average of 528.6 persons (SD = 2187.4). While significant in size, there is clearly room for more services, given the size of the popu-

lation of individuals who could potentially benefit.

In general, it is important to state that if served, many persons, almost 40 percent, complete their program of services. Another 40 percent obtained positive employment outcomes including competitive employment (39.7 %), supported employment (13.7%), or sheltered employment (10.9%). Almost 20 percent were seeking employment. Very few (16.2 %) were not employed and not seeking employment. Clearly, a large proportion of those persons who received employment-related services succeeded. Given more resources, programs could positively impact more persons.

What types of support and resources do they need? We presented a list of 50 areas and asked the programs to rate their priority needs. Reported in Boone and Watson (1999), programs indicated that needs were high across all areas with average

ratings of between 3 and 4 for most items. Even more importantly, the needs identified were similar to those identified by college and university programs. Table One illustrates how some of the key areas compared.

Furthermore, respondent programs prioritized a number of specific resources as areas of high need. These included resources for employer development, workplace literacy, problem solving, job maintenance/advancement, and job accommodations. Since some of these training resources are available, it is clear that programs are unaware of their availability and could benefit from a network of expertise to help find resources, match them to need, and provide technical consultation in their use.

Programs were asked about their preferences in strategies to obtain these materials. These results, again similar to those obtained in the PEPNet survey, are presented in Table Two.

Table One: Mean Priorities¹

| Needs for Technical Assistance | RT-31 | PEPNet |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Funding/Grant Writing | 3.89 | 4.07 |
| Ways to Improve Services | 3.83 | 3.93 |
| Advocacy Resources | 3.66 | 3.35 |
| Technology for Access | 3.46 | 3.93 |
| Staff Development | 3.38 | 3.76 |

¹The scale ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Table Two: Mean Preferred Strategies¹

| Strategy | RT-31 | PEPNet |
|---|--------------|---------------|
| State or regional seminars | 3.75 | 3.58 |
| Workshops for service providers | 3.75 | 3.44 |
| Collaborations with colleagues | 3.74 | 3.61 |
| Faculty/staff in service training/ development | 3.74 | 3.54 |
| Resource materials center | 3.65 | 3.60 |
| State or regional networks | 3.64 | 3.54 |

¹The scale ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

The desired technical assistance strategies are very much parallel to those desired and preferred by college and university programs. Furthermore, the mean ratings of need were higher. Is this indicative of more need?

These data highlight the need for on-going attention to developing these community-based programs at the state and regional level. Overall, we need to assist these programs in their efforts to better serve individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. By doing so, we will enable more students to obtain the quality of services they need in order to obtain employment and succeed at work. Our efforts should focus on the entire deaf and hard of hearing population, not just the 29 percent who go to college. At the state level, we need to implement interagency agreements between rehabilitation, education, and community-based programs to provide more employment training opportunities. We need to identify and organize existing expertise, resources and materials to implement these agreements and to expand the state funding and resources needed to further develop these employment training programs.

At the regional level, we should encourage existing networks like PEPNet to expand their outreach to target community-based employment

training programs. These efforts should identify and organize expertise, resources, and materials to implement needed agreements to encourage these programs to grow and serve more individuals. Finally, on the national level, there is a clear need to fund and bring resources together to help develop and improve employment training programs at all levels, not just for colleges and universities.

References

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