State Agency
Promising Practice

Shifting Resources Away from Sheltered Workshops in Vermont

by Jennifer Sulewski

Background

Over six years, regulations in Vermont gradually restricted and eventually prohibited the use of state funds for sheltered workshops or enclaves. Concurrent with the change in funding regulations, the state worked with providers to convert the remaining sheltered workshops in Vermont.

Implementation

The elimination of congregate and group employment happened over time as part of the agency's priority-setting process. Developed every three years and updated annually, Vermont's state System of Care plan outlined the priorities of the state Division of Disability and Aging Services (DDAS). Because DDAS had a clear commitment to individualizing supports, converting to a system that would not allocate resources to congregate settings seemed like an obvious step to take. Getting to that point, however, took several stages.

Vermont's 1999 System of Care plan stated that DDAS funds could not be used to increase the capacity of sheltered workshops (or congregate residential settings). The 2002 plan went a step further by stating that state funds could not be used to increase the capacity of group employment settings such as enclaves or work crews. These initial steps stopped the growth in sheltered workshop placements.

Meanwhile, DDAS, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the University of Vermont, and provider management worked together to successfully convert workshops to individualized supports. Between 1987 and 2004, DDAS and VR collaborated with four providers to close down their workshops and move people into community supports, providing both technical support and extra funding. (More detail on state/local collaboration in the conversion process is provided in another promising practice, Working Together to Convert the Last Sheltered Workshop in Vermont to Individualized Supports.)

An important part of Vermont's strategy was working with providers to convert all remaining workshops before actually setting a policy directive that funding could no longer be used for congregate settings. By doing this, the state avoided "pulling the rug out" from under providers by eliminating congregate funding all at once.

Once all existing sheltered workshops had been successfully closed in 2005, the System of Care plan stated that DDAS funds could not be used to fund sheltered workshops at all.

Impact

Currently there are no state-funded sheltered workshops in Vermont. Supports are tailored to the individual. Most individuals receive 1:1 day supports for employment and/or other day activities such as volunteer work, recreation, appointments, running errands, and visiting family and friends.

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Suggestions for Replication

» Eliminate sheltered workshops in stages. Vermont first stopped new placements to workshops, then moved on to convert existing workshops to community-based options.

» Involve stakeholders and maintain open communication. Vermont's state agencies and university worked with providers to address their concerns and aid workshop conversion before actually eliminating workshop funding.

» Have a clear goal in mind. By focusing on the goal of providing individualized day supports to everyone, DDAS-working with local providers-could implement a viable process to get there.

For more information on this practice contact thinkwork@umb.edu

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