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Impact of Legislation and Policy on Provision of VR Services To Consumers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Perspectives of Agency Administrators and Program Specialists

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Introduction

To further enhance VR efforts toward helping persons with disabilities achieve competitive employment outcomes and attain independence and self-sufficiency, several new legislative and policy initiatives were enacted by Congress and the Rehabilitation Services Administration. These initiatives included the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Interagency Agreements between VR and postsecondary programs, Order of Selection policies, and the Ticket to Work Incentives

Improvement Act of 1999. Given that these initiatives were implemented within the past five years, a key question guiding this study was, “to what extent have they impacted on provision of VR services to consumers who are deaf or hard of hearing?”

This report summarizes the perspectives of administrators and program specialists from 43 state agencies. The sections that follow provide a brief description of the study, the types of data collected, and highlights some of the key findings.

Description of the Study

Data Collection. A 23-item questionnaire was mailed to the state directors of 51 state agencies including the District of Columbia that provide vocational rehabilitation services in the U.S. Agencies for the blind and agencies located in U.S. territories were not included in the study. Up to two mailings yielded a total of 43 out of 51 completed questionnaires for an overall response rate of 84%.

Type of data collected. The types of information requested in the questionnaire included:

- trends in number of case closures by disability type (all disabilities, deaf, and hard of hearing) over past five years (whether increased, decreased, or remained stable),
- trends in employment of counselors by type of caseload over past five years (whether increased, decreased, or remained stable),
- perceptions of impact of current legislative and policy trends on provision of services to the target population (positive, negative, not sure, or no impact),
- perceptions of impact of current legislative and policy trends on key roles and functions of professionals in administrative or specialist positions with responsibility for services to the target population, and
- level of priority and type of technical assistance needed by state agencies to further enhance services to the target population.

Summary of key findings

Case closure trends. Overall, more than one-half of states reported increases in case 26 closure trends for all disability groups and for persons who are hard of hearing. On the other hand, more states reported case 26 closure trends for persons who are deaf were stable and fewer reported experiencing decreases compared to the other two target groups (all disabilities and hard of hearing).

Counselor employment trends. Overall, more than one-half of states reported employment trends were stable for those with caseloads of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing with only small increases or decreases. On the other hand, more states reported either increases or decreases in employment of counselors with mainly general caseloads.

Impact of legislation and policy. Over one-third of the responding states indicated the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) had either no impact or they were uncertain of its impact on provision of VR services to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Only a small number of states reported WIA had either a positive or negative impact.

At the time the survey was conducted, the Ticket to Work initiative was still in the first phase of implementation with 13 states. As a result, nearly three-fourths of the responding states indicated they were not participants in the Ticket to Work program and could not provide an assessment of its impact at the time.

More than one-half of states reported they utilize Order of Selection policies and have Interagency agreements between VR and postsecondary programs. Overall, compared

to Order of Selection a higher percentage of states reported Interagency Agreements had a positive impact on provision of VR services to the target population. Compared to WIA and Order of Selection, only a small number of states indicated Interagency Agreements had a negative impact on provision of services.

Extent of shortages of rehabilitation counselors. Overall, about one-third of the responding states reported experiencing significant shortages of counselors to work with consumers with hearing loss. With regard to specific target groups (deaf or hard of hearing), there was a slightly higher demand indicated for counselors to work with persons who are deaf compared to those who are hard of hearing.

Impact of legislation and policy on roles of administrators/program specialists responsible for VR services to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Over three-fourths of the states employ professionals in administrative or program specialist positions with responsibility for programs/services targeted to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. These professionals perform a variety of key roles and functions ranging from program development and program evaluation to staff development and training. More than one-half of the responding states reported that as a result of recent legislative and policy initiatives, changes had occurred in SCD roles and functions. When asked to provide examples of the ways in which SCD roles and functions had changed, the respondents' narrative comments were related to the following three categories: (a) line authority management and supervision, (b) technical assistance, and (c) program development.

Priorities and needs for technical assistance. To help enhance the provision of VR services to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, the top three types of technical assistance strategies preferred by a majority of the responding states were the following: (1) face-to-face training via workshops and conferences, (2) use of distance education technology, and (3) computer-based access to information and technical assistance.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to ascertain the impact of changes in federal employment and rehabilitation legislation and policy on service delivery to persons who deaf or hard of hearing. Among the key findings of this study reported by a majority of the responding states were the following:

- case 26 closure trends during the past five years had increased for VR consumers who are hard of hearing while remaining stable for consumers who are deaf,
- SCDs have key roles within state agencies, however, the roles and functions of SCDs were changing as a result of legislative and policy trends; for some SCDs, the changes resulted in expanded responsibilities for services to the target population; for other SCDs, they were taking on more responsibility for services to other target populations in addition to those who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- the use of interagency agreements between VR and postsecondary programs was identified as the one

specific legislative and policy initiative that positively impacted on the provision of VR services to the target population,

- most states are experiencing moderate shortages of counselors to work with VR consumers with hearing loss, however with regard to specific target populations, a slightly higher demand was indicated for counselors to work with consumers who are deaf, and
- the key needs for technical assistance encompassed those related to ongoing training/professional development, information sharing, and networking with other professionals who work

with the target population through strategies such as face-to-face training, distance education technology, and computer-based or electronic technology.

Next Steps

A complete summary of the study is available on the University of Arkansas Research and Training Center's website www.uark.edu/deafrtc/publications.html. In addition, a second phase of this study, beginning during Spring 2003, will examine the impact of legislation and policy from the perspectives of VR counselors. It is anticipated that the full study will be completed and available for national dissemination by late Fall 2003.

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