INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) have emphasized the focus on EBP in all research projects publicly funded through NIDRR (Brannon, 2010). There is emphasis on the meaning of research findings and translating and disseminating evidence-based practices so they affect and inform practice and policy (Leahy & Arokiasamy, 2010). NIDRR and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), as the major funding sources of rehabilitation research, are working to close the gap between practice and EBP research. In a resource-limited environment, evidence of efficacy and effectiveness can help make programmatic funding decisions more rational and, hopefully, more equitable (Brannon, 2010). The current climate calls for evidence to justify VR services, along with the emphasis on the development and implementation of evidence-based practices that can assist state VR programs that are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of VR service provision.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover emerging and promising vocational rehabilitation service delivery practices that helped improve employment outcomes of people with disabilities. The multi-stage qualitative analysis involved the selection of four high performing state VR agencies based on annual adjusted rehabilitation rates and other indicators of innovations in practice. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the policies, procedures, practices and structural elements related to the provision of effective best practices to individuals with disabilities served in the four state sample of VR agencies that lead to successful employment outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

An online survey was undertaken of state vocational rehabilitation agency directors, CSAVR Regional Representatives, NET state contacts, and TACE directors regarding emerging and promising vocational rehabilitation service delivery practices that helped improve employment outcomes of people with disabilities in their respective states. The results of this initial survey provided useful information to design and conduct a comprehensive multiple case study of four state vocational rehabilitation agencies that are using promising practices and are producing positive results and outcomes for people
with disabilities seeking employment assistance.

A pilot case study was conducted in order to prepare for the case studies with the four selected state agencies. The pilot case study was conducted with the Department of Human Services-Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS), the public rehabilitation program in Michigan. The pilot case study allowed the research team to test the planned procedures and train the researchers prior to the full implementation of the study with the four selected state agencies.

The pilot case study methodology was based on traditional case study conventions, as described by Yin (2009) and Stake (2006), and Hancock and Algozzine (2006). While the above case study approach worked well for the single pilot case study, the researchers realized a different case study method would be needed to facilitate a multiple case study approach. The decision to reconsider the case study methodology was based on the number of research team members (8) and the need to conduct multiple case studies. A new qualitative case study methodology was selected. The new methodology adopted by the research team was Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill, 2012). The CQR qualitative method was subsequently used for the four state VR agencies multiple case studies.

Research questions

The primary research questions were designed to elicit information from the case study participants regarding services and interventions they believed were evidence-based, innovative, or promising practices that lead to improving employment outcomes for customers served. The research questions were intentionally developed as open-ended in order to provide an opportunity for sharing EBP and best practices and to encourage candid dialogue among the study participants. The main case study research questions are:

1. What are the specific best practices that appear to be evidence-based and transportable to other state VR agencies?

2. What are the best models of effective practice, policy and procedures among state VR agencies that result in the creation of an environment that promotes innovation and the effective delivery of services to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve employment outcomes?

Selection of state sample for the study

To select the four state VR agencies for inclusion in this study, a number of assumptions, guidelines and criteria were utilized. Rather than attempting to select a random sample of state agencies for generalization purposes, the study attempted to identify states that have demonstrated, through past performance, that they have developed effective models of delivering of services that sets them apart in performance from other state agencies. A number of resources were used to identify the state VR agencies to be included in this multiple case study. These included guidance from the Advisory Council in relation to their knowledge of model programs within the public rehabilitation program, data available through the RRTC Phase 1 studies that used RSA 911 data, and survey data
from state agencies regarding best or promising practices in public rehabilitation and the nomination of exemplary states in terms of effective practices. Based on these data inputs the following states were selected for inclusion in the multiple case studies: Maryland, Mississippi, Texas, and Utah. Following selection of the states, both NIDRR and RSA reviewed and approved this set of state VR agencies for use as the sample for this multiple case study.

**Data collection procedures**

A number of data collection strategies were used in this study. These included an analytical review of all pertinent descriptive documents that describe policy, procedures, and best practices related to VR, including structural elements (staffing, work flow internal and external resources) and the cost of these services. The data collection process provided the research team the opportunity to formally interview key individuals.

Data was collected through the use of structured individual interviews and focus groups. For those states where the best practice involved other community-based agencies, every effort was made to include these key individuals in the data collection process to obtain a complete picture of the best practice and environmental context. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and a transcript of the interviews and focus groups produced.

Key informants within the agencies, and external support agencies, were interviewed. Each agency was divided into three distinct organizational levels within each state agency. The three groups consisted of (1) senior management, including the state director; (2) mid-level management; and (3) selected counselors and other staff involved with the agency’s innovations and best practices.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

A qualitative case study methodology developed by Hill et al (1997) known as Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was used for the selected four case studies. CQR was chosen given the approach of the case study and the need to explore the phenomena of evidence-based practices. While the literature calls for the development and implementation of evidence-based practices, there is a lack of detailed description as what constitutes evidence-based practice in VR service delivery that enhances outcomes for customers. The research team chose CQR, as it would, “allow the results to emerge from the data without imposing theoretical constructs on the data” (Hill, 2012).

In keeping with Hill’s (2012) CQR process, data from the focus group interviews for each of senior management, mid-management and counselor and staff were organized under core ideas that fell under domains that represented the ideas presented. This was accomplished by continually returning to the transcript data to ensure faithfulness to the data. Data was examined for themes and then themes compared across the various agency levels interviewed. Data was then examined across all four of the selected state agencies to look for overall themes of innovation and best practices. A standardized structured interview protocol guided the formal interviews and focus groups within each of the four state agencies. The comprehensive multiple case study research team was led by researchers at Michigan State University and included researchers from the University...
of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Wisconsin-Stout, the University of Texas at El Paso, and Southern University. Although each case study was conducted independently, the results across all four studies were reviewed, critiqued, and integrated into a comprehensive cross-analysis by members of the broader research team. Additionally, an external auditor conducted an analysis of the comprehensive cross-analysis. These additional steps substantially elevated the level of trustworthiness of the study.

PRINCIPLE FINDINGS

Research Question One: What are the specific best practices that appear to be evidence-based and transportable to other state VR agencies?

Organizational Promising Practice

The following are brief descriptions of the findings from Research Question One for organizational promising practices identified across the four state agencies:

**Incubator unit.** “Incubator unit” startups can occur at any level or location within the agency requiring no formal permission to engage in developing innovative services.

**SharePoint.** The agency uses a Microsoft web based cloud “SharePoint” site that the agency calls “Replicating Success”.

**E-3.** Inclusive of the dual customer approach was the belief that each customer and employer of the agency be provided with Excellent Service, Every Customer, Every Time or E3 for short.

**Business Relations.** Initially funded by the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), Utah VR provides funding for this project, which now consists of funding for two full-time staff. The Business Relations team provides support and education to businesses that express an interest in hiring and retaining people with disabilities.

**Rapid Response and Internal Service Delivery.** AbilityWorks, Inc. is a network of 17 community rehabilitation centers located across 10 districts throughout the state. Although AbilityWorks is managed by the state agency, it is technically a 501(c) 3 non-profit entity designed to complement the vocational rehabilitation program by providing vocational assessment and evaluation, job training, and work experiences exclusively to VR agency consumers.

**Linking Innovative Networks of Community Services (LINCS).** LINCS is a community-based alternative available within the broader AbilityWorks program that provides evaluation, training, and work experience opportunities directly with employers rather than in facility-based environments.

**Business Development Program and Employment Coordinators.** Employment Coordinators perform an integral role in developing and managing business relationships in concert with the agency’s OVR Business Development Program.

**Specialized Coordinators, Counselors, and Caseloads.** Specialized caseloads for
Transition, Supported Employment, consumers who are Deaf or hard of hearing, and consumers with alcohol and drug addiction disorders.

**Data Driven.** The agency fosters a culture of high expectations and pride in their high employment outcome rate and actively uses data to establish goals and monitor performance. Staff members across all levels of the organization including counselors, managers, and leaders are held accountable for achieving the objectives of the organization.

**Clinical and Organizational Skills Enhancement.** The agency has developed a three level leadership program. Participants get a “broader perspective of the VR program nationally, statewide and within their part of the agency.”

**Service Delivery Promising Practices**

The following are brief descriptions of the findings from Research Question One for service delivery promising practices identified across the four state agencies:

**Valforce.** A local pilot initiative that is a contract with a company called Valforce to outsource some of the non-core functions.

**CRP Certification.** Two agencies require CRP’s to become credentialed and in one state the CRP can become certified as providers of Customized Self-Employment.

**DARSforce.** A promising practice at the state level is the use of a web based cloud technology the agency calls “DARSforce.” It was launched as a tool to manage business relations and assist staff in their efforts to bring job-ready consumers and businesses together.

**Embedded Training Programs.** Programs are similar to the supported employment “placement and train” model. However, these agency customers are not supported employment customers. Once the training is completed, successful participants are hired by the host company or are placed in jobs in same industry.

**Supported Job Based Training (SJB) and Supported Employment (SE).** Supported Job Based Training (SJB) and Supported Employment (SE) programs provide employment assistance and supports such as job placement, job coaching, job development, job retention, assistive technology, specialized job training, and individually tailored supervision. Job coaches must be certified and receive continuing education.

**Choose To Work.** Choose to Work (CTW) is a partnership program between the USOR and Utah’s Department of Workforce Services. The program is designed to increase employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities who may not need as intensive services as a job coach or supported job-based training (SJB) but who have been unsuccessful in obtaining employment through traditional efforts.

**Utah Defendant Offender Workforce Development Taskforce (UDOWD).** Under an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Justice Assistance Grant, the UDC created a
program in collaboration with allied agencies to provide job development and offer direct assistance to individuals under the jurisdiction of UDC.

**Career Exploration Services.** Career Exploration Services (CES) is a unit within the state VR agency that provides vocational evaluation and testing for individuals accepted for services by DRS.

**Work Incentive Planning and Benefits Services.** An extremely well received promising practice is the development and implementation of fee for service benefits counseling. One agency developed their own fee based Benefits Counseling service, including the credentials a person must have to provide this service. In another agency, the Work Incentive Planning Services (UWIPS) program was created after receiving funding in the form of grants from the Social Security Administration and the State’s Governor’s Council.

**Soft Skills Training.** Smart Work Ethics (SWE) is a purchased soft skills training program with a standardized curriculum designed to change behavior and improve employability through an interactive training approach.

**Maryland Seamless Transition Collaborative (MSTC).** The agency has partnered with a non-profit organization called TransCen, Inc. as part of an RSA demonstration grant. The “goal was inter-agency collaboration to result in sequential delivery of transition services.

**Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) program.** ABI emerged from “collaboration with other providers and other professionals across the state in order to develop a supported employment (SE) program for individuals with acquired brain injury.” When ABI clients reach a “minimum 90 days of employment, and employment is stable, then the VR agency closes their case.” “Immediately, the same day, the individual’s case is moved into post-employment services.”

**Individual Placement and Support (IPS).** This model the agency uses is collaborative process with the Mental Hygiene Administration (MHA), which serves individuals with significant mental health issues (Dartmouth; Johnson & Johnson). The program uses braided funding and blended services. There is a single point of entry and anyone who is eligible for services with MHA is presumed eligible for VR services.

**Research Question Two: What are the best models of effective practice, policy and procedures among state VR agencies that result in the creation of an environment that promotes innovation and the effective delivery of services to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve employment outcomes?**

Multiple domains were noted across the three organizational levels within each state agency for senior managers, mid-level managers and selected counselors and other staff involved with the agency’s innovations and best practices. Below is a summary of the multiple domains that appeared at each organizational level, including domains unique to individual agencies.
Common Agency Domains

**Culture.** Effecting organizational cultural change is key in order to make substantial changes in agency operations and service delivery practices enhancing service quality and employment outcomes for customers. This includes the notion trying to instill, “a culture of critical and smart thinking before you do.” One agency identified Transformational Agenda, described as the development and promotion of an agency culture that would allow best practices to be adopted and innovation to occur. Culture is also considered an environment where all staff are, “very encouraged to be creative, be visionary to deliver VR message, goals and mission.”

**Leadership.** Agency Leaders were keenly aware of their response to innovative ideas brought forward and must demonstration a show of support for agency staff. Credit was given to agency leaders for instituting organizational changes leading to a less bureaucratic and more flexible responsive agency. Counselors/Staff appreciate the accessibility of agency leaders. Agency leader continuity was also recognized as an important element to agency success.

**Support for Innovative Practice and Promising Practices.** Agency leaders encourage and support innovative ideas throughout all levels in the organization. Leaders encourage communication and autonomy and are open to ideas from staff. Promising practices include innovative programs such as the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) program, Social Security Benefits Counseling, Individual Placement and supports (IPS) evidence-based supported employment and the MSTC transition programs. Collaboration with community partners and requiring field staff to be heavily involved with service providers through constant contact and communication were viewed as the foundations for successful innovative ventures.

**Partnerships.** Agency staff value relationships with all partners including businesses, employers, and CRPs. The agency works closely with all three groups to ensure that each groups needs are met through collaborative working relationships and seamless service delivery. Inter and intra-agency partnerships are considered a critical component of service provision.

**Staff Training & Development.** A highly trained staff is essential to achieve the working alliance and provide professional services. Training in specific targeted populations such as blindness, deafness, autism, transitioning youth and multicultural counseling are practices aimed at enhancing service delivery and employment outcomes for agency customers. Training is not limited to that necessary to successfully complete the job tasks, rather, counselors are encouraged, “to look for opportunities of personal growth and advancement.”

**Working Alliance & Client-Centered Services.** The Working Alliance or Client-Centered services was used as a proxy for focusing the program on professionalism in rehabilitation counseling services and implying that rehabilitation counselors should be performing their duties with deference to the counselor role over that of the case manager role inherent in the position. Counselors’ statements reflected a feeling of being connected to the counseling component of rehabilitation counseling. Client-centered
services incorporate the holistic view of clients into rehabilitation planning, rather than being limited to a tightly focused view of functional abilities and mechanical job placement. Client self-actualization is viewed as equally important as employment for the outcome.

**Unique Agency Domains**

**Return on Investment.** Marketing the benefits of services and the return on investment to state policy makers has demonstrated the value of services in measurable terms to both internal and external stakeholders, one agency has been able to stabilize and expand the scope of this program over time.

**Service Integration and Business Model of “Structure, Sales & Service”**. Service Integration/Coordination focuses on providing, when feasible and productive, services directly to clients rather than relying on referrals to external agencies. One agency incorporates a Business Model that consists of 1) Structure (agency is its own state department; 501c3 embedded; provides flexibility), 2) Service (high quality; client first; focus on outcomes), and 3) Sales (maintaining relationships with legislators, employers, partners, public).

**Increasing Visibility and Communication/Constituent Relations.** The focus on increasing awareness of the vocational rehabilitation program, the people served, and the benefits in providing services for both individuals with disabilities and the community. One agency viewed activities under this domain as critical to their ongoing efforts to secure community support for the program, engage partners in a dialogue regarding joint services, and communicate effectively with the state legislature to preserve, and ultimately expand, funding for the program. Another agency views communication as critical interaction at all levels of the agency and the public and operates an Office of Communications and Constituent Relations (OCCR) specifically designated to address questions and requests from legislators and assist with public relations campaigns.

**Rehabilitation Counselor and Unit Autonomy**. Agency staff has the flexibility to meet the service needs of an individual client and district offices may alter services to meet the needs of the surrounding communities. Agency leaders strive to provide district managers, supervisors, and counselors with the flexibility (within a specified framework) to adapt to the challenges of services provision in a given area or with a particular client.

**Comprehensive Service Provision**. One agency provides counselors with the ability to refer internally for a range of different services supported the feeling of inter-agency partnerships and providing services based on individual client needs. Counselors can refer to an array of services (i.e., benefits counseling, assessment as essential components in developing and achieving rehabilitation plans).

**Resources.** Agency leaders are committed to acquiring, developing and disseminating resources as needed for field operations. Resource management includes exploring novel ways to fund programs such as the “braided” funding for IPS SE services in conjunction with the state mental health authority. Other funding opportunities included grants for
transition programming and setting aside funds for successful innovative programs like the Acquired Brain Injury program in Maryland.

CONCLUSION

The state federal VR program has been challenged to demonstrate the effectiveness of VR services provided to eligible customers. The emphasis on the development and implementation of evidence-based practices is needed to assist state VR programs demonstrate the effectiveness of VR service provision. VR service provision must develop a foundation of evidence-based practices that lead to competitive employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The qualitative data collected and analyzed in this initial study of evidence-based and promising practices will be used in the next stage of this investigation in a national Delphi Study of vocational rehabilitation experts to gain a national consensus on the importance and portability of these promising practices for other state agencies to implement to increase employment outcomes for those served.

In addition to the qualitative highlights from this study on the primary research questions, the current study also collected qualitative data for each of the four states on their performance with specific sub-populations of customers that have been historically underserved, and designed and implemented a survey instrument to examine the perceptions of rehabilitation counselors in each of the four states regarding EBP. These data are displayed and discussed in detail within the overall research monograph.