



**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE and CONTINUING EDUCATION
TACE CENTER: REGION IV**

*A Project of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University
in collaboration with the DBTAC: Southeast ADA*

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
REGARDING DEVELOPING A “COMMUNITY OF
EXCELLENCE”**

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Overview

The TACE Region IV recognizes the dramatic challenges faced by vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies in a time of sharp decreases in resources and heightened demands for services. The impact of order of selection, increased caseload sizes and maintaining qualified staff pose real issues for agencies in achieving performance goals.

Implementing a “Community of Excellence” project in each state is intended to focus on developing effective service practices and methods to enhance results for customers and the VR agency.

TACE is committed to assisting agencies to identify evidence-based practices that will improve individual customer results. Customized Employment is one of those proven methods, which may assist counselors and VR managers in meeting customer employment needs.

Question: What is a “Community of Excellence”?

Answer: A Community of Excellence is an opportunity for a vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency to work in partnership with TACE to build on the state's existing strengths using TACE technical assistance. Each Community of Excellence will focus on a geographic community or department of services, such as transition, evaluators, etc. to implement innovative strategies, including customized employment. This effort will offer personalized technical assistance for the state to determine best strategies for implementing and replicating effective best practices in employment and rehabilitation, including customized employment.

Question: What are the goals of developing a “Community of Excellence”?

Answer: The overall goal of the Community of Excellence is to give the state an opportunity to develop a model that builds on the excellence of current services, to

target certain areas for improvement, and to enhance services with the inclusion of customized employment.

Each “Community of Excellence” will be designed to:

- Increase understanding and replication of effective employment and rehabilitation practices that result in improved employment outcomes;
- Build local capacity to improve and expand customized employment services and supports;
- Serve as a catalyst to systems change and improvement at a state and local level;
- Develop, document, and disseminate new and improved theory, policy, practice and knowledge that revolutionize the state of the science in rehabilitation and employment service delivery in the Southeast and nationwide

Question: Who can develop a “Community of Excellence”?

Answer: Each state will have the opportunity to choose one Community of Excellence to be supported by the TACE Region IV. In FY2009, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi will each have the opportunity to develop a Community of Excellence. In FY2010, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky will each have the opportunity to develop a Community of Excellence.

Question: Why will each “Community of Excellence” incorporate customized employment?

Answer: Customized employment is a demonstrated effective best practice for addressing the employment and rehabilitation needs of people with the most significant disabilities and leads to improved employment outcomes. Almost every state has identified the need to serve persons with the most significant disabilities. Customized Employment is also a set of strategies that can be used individually to assist any job seeker with one or more of the following; discovering the best of themselves; planning

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for employment while considering their own conditions, contributions, and work interests; representing themselves to employers; approaching employment from a non-competitive perspective and broadening their approach to creating a job that meets an employer's needs, either as a wage earner in the business or as a contractor offering services that meet the employer's needs.

Question: What criteria must a Vocational Rehabilitation or Services for the Blind agency demonstrate when selecting a site to develop a “Community of Excellence” incorporating customized employment and possibly other areas of innovation into the state VR service system?

Answer:

- Each specific site shows evidence of strong community leadership from both VR and community agencies;
- One or more community agency provides a letter of commitment to participate in the innovation;
- The community has some experience with innovation and is able to deal with some level of risk taking;
- The sites have adequate staff resources to engage in the Community of Excellence initiative;
- The site has clearly defined their goals and outcomes for the project in terms of improved customer results;
- A local liaison to the project has been identified to work with TACE and the state liaison; and,
- The local community sites consider the linkages to other innovative activities underway in their particular state.

Question: What is the duration of the model?

Answer: The Southeast TACE will provide intensive training and technical assistance to Communities of Excellence in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi from February 2009 through September 2009 followed by continued technical assistance in Year Two. The Southeast TACE will provide training and technical assistance to Communities of Excellence in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky from August 2009 through September 2010.

Question: What is customized employment?

Answer: According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, “Customized employment means individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the person with a disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer.”

Question: What are the phases of developing a “Community of Excellence”?

Answer:

Model Conception - Develop a model for a Community of Excellence incorporating customized employment and possibly other areas into your service system.

Responsibilities include:

- Create a leadership team to conceptualize the model, review the model, and refine the model for state incorporation.
- Create an implementation team of the model for data collection, reporting, and management of the model.
- Implement the model using customized employment with an individually determined number of customers.
- Establish a point person for liaison with the TACE Innovation Team.

- Work with the TACE data gathering team for data collection.

Capacity Building – Building capacity through training and technical assistance on the following topics for VR staff and VR partner agency staff: discovery, capturing discovery through profiles, customized person-centered planning, portfolio/visual resume development, job development and negotiation, job site analysis, accommodations, support, and customized employment. Optional topics to include are areas such as customer service, transition services, customer choice, person directed services, individual or personal budgets, independent advice, and community services.

Implementation of the Model

Evaluation and Refinement - The TACE Center Region IV innovations team will work with each state implementation team to evaluate and refine the model. The TACE team will work with each state to document local, regional, and/or state systems change that supports program effectiveness.

Replication in the State - Each state will determine if and how the features are replicated. Upon determination of the model features, implementation strategies of the model will be examined for effective strategies for statewide implementation

Question: What will TACE Center Region IV provide Vocational Rehabilitation and Services for the Blind agencies?

Answer:

- Leadership Development
- 7 on-site days for training, technical assistance, and mentoring, 5 webinars, and a monthly call
- Training with the curriculum tailored to the site
- Support and mentoring of staff/teams through the customized employment process

- \$10,000 (to be used during the first year; all 7 site selection criteria must be met as outlined above)

Question: Do we have to implement the model upon completion?

Answer: The intent of the “Communities of Excellence” is to enable VR agencies to develop and refine models of service to improve employment results for people with significant disabilities. As with any learning and systems change process, we expect these innovative projects will enhance learning at the individual staff, local community and VR agency levels. We expect that features, components or the entire model may be further refined and implemented based on the viability of the model results. There are no mandated requirements for implementation at conclusion. Rather, we suggest states view this as a systems change and innovation strategy.

Question: How will a state measure the success of a developed “Community of Excellence”?

Answer: Each Community of Excellence will develop its own plan, in consultation with the TACE innovations team. Success will be individually defined in the plan. Options may include:

- Customer outcomes achieved
- Community collaboration increased
- Career and job opportunities increased
- Qualitative measures related to job satisfaction, wages, permanence of job (retention)
- Enhanced skills for rehab counselors, CRP's etc.
- Recognized necessary supports and components for success
- Redesigned services
- Qualitative customer services changes

Question: Who should be on the conceptualization team?

Answer: The team should have staff that are part of the leadership and planning of the VR agency. There should also be at least one other community agency representative on the team.

Question: What is the role of the conceptualization team?

Answer: The conceptualization team will meet at the onset of the Community of Excellence to determine the model to be implemented in their state. The model will feature:

- Defined innovations, including customized employment;
- Implementation by targeted departments, divisions, and/or community rehabilitation providers (CRPs);
- Identified flow of services; and,
- Clearly defined outcomes with strategies to determine the success of the model.

The conceptualization team will also review the model at least twice a year and upon completion of the model will determine how the model will impact the state implementation of the selected innovative features.

Question: Who comprises the TACE Center Region IV Innovations Team?

Answer: Michael Callahan, Marc Gold & Associates, is a native Mississippian who has consulted throughout the US, Canada and Europe in the area of employment and transition for the past twenty-five years.

Norciva Shumpert, Marc Gold & Associates, has been working as a consultant in various states with organizations, families, and State entities regarding customized employment, transition, self-employment, community life opportunities, system reorganization, and self directed services.

Joe Skiba, Organization and Systems Change Consulting, has 29 years of experience in the public vocational rehabilitation system, including counseling, management and a variety of administrative positions. As state director of the Michigan Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program from 1995-1998, his work focused on developing a customer-driven delivery system, building private-public partnerships and re-engineering the VR delivery system.

Harold Thornton, a native of Pensacola, Florida, resides in Tallahassee, Florida where he serves as a Program Administrator for the Department of Education in the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Mr. Thornton is responsible for the overall administration of the SSA/Ticket to Work Program, which includes the development and implementation of policies, procedures and operating systems related to the program.

Jill Houghton, Deputy Director, TACE Center Region IV brings over 18 years of experience at the federal, state and local levels to advance the employment and economic self sufficiency of all people with disabilities. Ms. Houghton's work experiences are diverse and most recently include working for the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation from 2003 - 2005 and serving as the Executive Director of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Advisory Panel from 2005 – 2008, which was housed independently at the Social Security Administration in Washington D.C.