

**Investing in People:
Launching Supported Employment on a
Crowded Public Agenda
(Part 2)**

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where the discrepancy between potential and actual employment opportunities appeared to have significant policy and budgetary consequences.

Supported employment studies had documented that individuals with severe disabilities could learn and perform complicated work (Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Gold, 1975) and that service delivery models could provide ongoing employment support (Rhodes & Valenta, 1985; Wehman, 1980). At the same time, projections for a recovering economy created confidence that jobs could be considered a reasonable expectation for more young people of all ability levels. Together, these circumstances created a high degree of optimism about the employment potential of individuals with severe disabilities.

However, this optimistic picture contrasted sharply with descriptive studies of the actual experiences of persons with severe disabilities. The work opportunities, work-related services, and employment benefits actually received by individuals with severe disabilities fell far short of the expectations that had been shaped by the research (Bellamy, Sheehan, Horner, & Boles, 1980). Further, the public cost of these day programs was escalating rapidly (Buckley & Bellamy, 1986), and as the first P.L. 94-142 generation of students with severe disabilities began to leave school, states were coming under increasing pressure to expand these non-vocational programs even more..

This paper describes the initial development of the supported employment program in 1984 and 1985 and the strategies and activities that resulted in the supported employment initiative, both to provide an example of the policy development process in rehabilitation and to clarify the origin of several issues that will be considered as those policies are reviewed (Schriner, 1990). Primary attention is focused on the supported employment program, although several concurrent activities addressed related employment issues for individuals with severe disabilities. The efforts are presented, not chronologically, but within frequently described components of the initial policy development process: getting on the policy agenda, defining the policy itself, and planning for implementation.

Getting on the Agenda

However compelling the discrepancy between actual and potential employment opportunities might have been, the ability to address this

Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD), a White House Working Group on Disability was formed to explore the contradictions in government policies and programs and to identify policy alternatives. Gathering in a single working group, the executive leadership of the many agencies whose policies affected individuals with disabilities provided the structure within which policy or program initiatives could be developed. The group built support within the administration for addressing the difficulties faced by individuals with disabilities and created the opportunity for individual agencies to present specific policy initiatives that could address some of the underlying fragmentation in federal disability programs. In early 1984, supported employment was raised for policy consideration through this group and received consideration in the final stages of development of the President's budget for Fiscal Year 1985.

To build support for the specific features of the supported employment proposal, visits to model supported employment programs were arranged for key decisionmakers in federal and state agencies, business groups, and professional associations. These visits provided the opportunity to see individuals with severe disabilities working in regular community jobs and small enclaves in major industries and provided direct evidence that such programs were feasible, well received by businesses, and supported by local and state agencies responsible for service delivery.

Defining the Policy

Within the priorities of the Reagan Administration, a successful response to the disparity between potential and actual employment opportunities had to leave states in charge of programs, avoid large federal expenditures, contribute to coherency of government programs, decrease dependence on public programs, and demonstrate accountability for program results.

Defining supported employment as a program alternative

Two strategies were used to develop a program definition that responded to the needs of individuals with disabilities within the constraints of administration goals. First, an OSERS work group was

supported employment consisted of individuals who had traditionally been found ineligible for vocational rehabilitation. Further, since vocational rehabilitation had as its primary mission returning individuals to the work force after a temporary period of service, supported employment differed in its emphasis on enduring support in the work place.

Supported employment differed from traditional day programs in the emphasis on employment and integration. Although supported employment was designed for the individuals served in day programs, the addition of employment and social integration goals resulted in very different service goals and approaches.

The definition of supported employment also challenged program developers and researchers to incorporate the best components of each other's work. None of the program approaches described at the time met all three criteria for supported employment. Some emphasized integrated employment but served individuals who were able to work without ongoing support; others served the intended population but failed to meet the integration or employment criteria. Consequently, while there was agreement that the three criteria represented desired program features, these features presented different kinds of program development challenges to existing service and research programs.

Promoting Supported Employment Through Federal Support for State Change Grants

An early key decision was to involve states directly in framing their own "state change" strategies for supported employment through a grant competition. In this way, interested states could provide the leadership for program restructuring, with federal support, on a statewide basis. Consequently, the supported employment initiative was unique in more than the definition of a new type of program. As a federal initiative, it represented a new approach to program initiation that reflected the prevailing views of the role of the federal and state governments. The supported employment initiative was designed as a discretionary grant program to assist states in establishing supported employment programs. The intent was to provide "a one-time, time-limited grant program that provides funds to help states convert traditional day activity programs to alternative supported employment methods" (Will, 1984, p. 5).

briefed on the purpose and structure of the initiative and included the requested increase in the budget that passed in the Fall of 1984. At the same time, an agreement between OSERS and ADD transferred funds from ADD to augment the budget for the state change program.

A simultaneous effort ensued to develop program regulations that would structure the state grant program. The final revised regulations set forth the goals of the new "state change" initiative and contrasted the effort with previous special demonstrations. The regulations emphasized, as key programmatic elements in state change projects, the states' "ability to achieve lasting statewide change and the coordination and participation in the projects of groups that are essential to the successful conduct of the project" (*Federal Register*, 1985).

Planning for Implementation

One outcome of the group process activities which helped define the OSERS' supported employment initiative was a year-long plan for generating interest and support, reducing potential opposition, developing capacity, and assuring availability of the cross-agency expertise that would be necessary to implement the proposed supported employment program. Supported employment was a new concept to most leaders and professionals in rehabilitation. Parents and advocates had little knowledge of its features. Few policy analysts, administrators, legislators, and elected executives had ever considered a budget providing funding for supported employment. Yet, many of these same individuals had key roles in managing, using, or sanctioning non-vocational day programs which operated in sharp contrast to the goals of supported employment. Consequently, OSERS officials developed a year-long strategy to continue demonstrating *how* supported employment worked, to furnish public officials and rehabilitation providers with firsthand experience of *what* supported employment was, and to convince decisionmakers at state and federal levels *why* changes should be made from day programs to supported employment.

Much of this effort was defined by the external advisory group that was convened to help plan the initiative. Critical areas of assistance identified by that group included evaluation planning, national information dissemination, technical assistance, staffing, research, marketing to industry, and reducing barriers and disincentive (OSERS, 1984).

skill training, behavior change, and on-site job support of individuals with disabilities. Although federal support was available for several training programs for counseling, vocational evaluation, and facility management roles in traditional programs, these did not typically address the behavior management and training skills needed by direct service staff in supported employment. In 1984-85, there were few training programs, limited evaluations of curricula, few examples of position descriptions, and virtually no public training programs for such direct service staff.

OSERS addressed this problem through a contract (300-85-0094) with Harold Russell Associates (HRA) of Massachusetts for a study of "Development of Staff Roles of Supported and Transitional Employment Programs." This study concluded with a seminar held in Washington, DC, in November 1985 and resulted in a consensus on recommendations for strengthening the direct service staff role in supported employment. The HRA proceedings and recommendations were summarized in materials distributed by OSERS (Cohen, Patton, & Melia, 1986). The HRA study served as a vital link between research and demonstration activities that helped frame supported employment's unique use of direct service staff, and the career development activities needed if such staff were to be available to local programs. Articles, newsletters, and presentations were prepared and widely disseminated during 1985 by OSERS and ADD staff explaining the concepts of supported employment and the need for preparation of competent direct service staff (Wehman & Melia, 1985).

Research

By late 1985, there were still few research projects that addressed methods of providing employment opportunities for persons with the most severe disabilities. Research priorities and proposals require significant lead time to prepare. Proposals must be prepared by technical experts, and in 1985, most of the leaders in supported employment were already significantly engaged in program developments. Moreover, research in supported employment requires access by researchers to the at-work performance of persons with disabilities in the natural environment of regular work places; and in 1985, work sites were just being established and placements just starting in most locations.

'the incentives supporting the status quo that were inherent in other federal programs. Two of these received particular attention during the planning for supported employment. The first concerned provisions of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that affected whether supported employment would be financially beneficial to individuals receiving SSI. The Section 1619 (a) and (b) provisions that allowed medical and income benefits to continue for individuals whose income exceeded the traditional cutoff point were due to expire. The administration initially supported expiration of these provisions, because very few individuals had taken advantage of the program. Since expiration would create a significant disincentive for individuals and their families to participate in supported employment, considerable effort was committed to gaining administration and congressional support for continuing these provisions. Responding to the leadership from the Commissioner of ADD, the Department of Health and Human Services did recommend continuation, and Congress did extend this program.

The second federal disincentive related to states, many of which used funds from the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) to support day activity programs. Because HCFA regulations did not allow funds to be used for vocational activities, states faced a loss of federal support if day activity programs were converted to supported employment. Several meetings were held with responsible officials to address this issue. While a solution was—and remains—elusive, some early relief was provided in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986. This statute defined supported employment as a reimbursable activity under one of HCFA's waiver programs.

Lessons and Reflections

How effective were the strategies that placed supported employment on a crowded public agenda? Perhaps a useful way to recapitulate is to organize the implicit strategies outlined in this paper using the following concepts, which are found in policy studies on implementing program initiatives:

- **Political access and sensitivity** These factors have been described as crucial if advocates for initiatives are to be successful in competitive situations (Petigrew, 1982). The supported employment initiative reached center stage because key consultants and change

lished departmental bureaucracies. Although extensive use was made of task forces, work groups, and consensus planning meetings, these arrangements were no substitute for adequate numbers of permanent staff with the expertise, motivation, and resources needed for program implementation. In particular, the initiative largely bypassed the regional office structure of the Rehabilitation Services Administration and the directors of the state mental retardation programs.

- **Follow-through** It is not enough to posit goals and outcome measures; procedures assuring adoption of evaluation criteria and use of information are required. In the supported employment activity, high marks for conceptualizing program goals and potential measures must be offset by a barely passing grade for actual implementation of a measurement system. The authority used to fund the initiative, Title III of the Rehabilitation Act (Special Projects and Demonstrations), did not have provisions for administering several projects with uniform data collection on common goals. When awards were made for the first state change grants, there were no common measurement and reporting requirements, despite the fact that the program had anticipated the need for explicit outcome measures.

As implementation began, supported employment left the realm of administration initiatives and was increasingly shaped by congressional decisions. Supported employment was included as a priority state activity in the 1984 Amendments to the Developmental Disabilities Act, defined as an allowable activity under Medicaid under some circumstances in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986, and redefined as a formula grant program in the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986. With each of these congressional actions, the definition of supported employment was debated anew, eligibility for services was shifted, and the strategy for distributing federal support was adjusted. What had begun as a discretionary grant program to assist interested states in converting existing day programs to supported employment became a new type of service available to a much larger clientele than those individuals with severe disabilities who received ongoing support in state programs. These changes reflect less a difference in philosophy about employment services than a difference in approach between the administration and the Congress about the federal role in supporting service programs. These differences provide the basis for continuing policy discussions about ongoing support, eligibility, and services to people with severe disabilities.

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