

# RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATIONS



DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
AND DEMONSTRATIONS  
Research Utilization Branch

Vol. II, No. 9

February 17, 1969

## A SPECIAL PROGRAM TO PLACE MENTALLY RETARDED PERSONS IN FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT

Under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy, a highly successful program to employ mentally retarded persons in the Federal Government was initiated in late 1963. The Civil Service Commission, with the advice and cooperation of the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, established a special hiring authority for mentally retarded persons. This was to be in effect until 1968 and has recently been extended to September 30, 1969, with a possibility of further extension based on the good results being achieved.

The program is unusual in several respects. Federal agencies enter into written agreements with the Civil Service Commission, designed to protect the interests of both retarded persons and employing agencies. The agencies agree to use the services of State Vocational Rehabilitation Departments in carrying out the hiring authority. They are also asked to identify, with the help of rehabilitation officials, tasks suitable for retarded persons. The judgment of rehabilitation counselors is substituted for the usual testing procedures to determine employability. The counselor certifies in writing that the retarded individual has the ability to perform a given job, is physically qualified to handle it without hazard, and is socially competent to function in that particular work environment and during after-work hours.

The hiring agency is also required to consult the counselor before separating an employee. This means the employer need not keep an unsatisfactory employee. It also assures the retarded client that continued rehabilitation services will be available.

Thus, a team effort in selective placement and follow-up of retarded persons was achieved. It permitted client evaluation, review and analysis of job tasks and work environments before placement, and continued contacts between employer and counselor afterwards to assure work adjustment.

As a result of this teamwork, over 2,800 placements were made throughout the Nation during the first 3 years of the program (1964-66), and 5,210 by October 1968. In 1967, the District of Columbia Department of Vocational Rehabilitation conducted a followup study (RD-2425-G) of the initial 2,800 placements. Data were gathered from unsigned questionnaires completed by the VR counselors, personnel officers, job supervisors, and retarded employees involved.

The four questionnaires included 257 items. Overall rate of return was about 78%. All this raw data has been put on IBM cards and computer tape and is available for further studies by approved researchers.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

The success of this program to hire retarded persons in Federal Government is sufficient to warrant its continuance on an indefinite or permanent basis. This should encourage State and local government agencies and private industry to follow suit, for the program is also suitable for them.

In particular, the concept of having rehabilitation counselors certify employability of retarded persons for specific jobs seems to have real merit, and may be applicable to other groups and settings.

Prospective employers might note the double advantage of restructuring their simpler jobs for retarded persons; more opportunities for the retarded and better utilization of present manpower. Since such restructuring occurred in only about 15% of these placements, more of it may be possible.

- If counselors and others can improve client's home environment, help him toward more realistic aspirations, provide better employment training, and mobilize community services to deal effectively with off-the-job problems, even greater success can be attained.

Absenteeism and unacceptable habits and behavior may cause failure on the part of some clients unless counselors intervene. Followup with client and employer until job adjustment seems assured is needed if these main sources of failure are to be remedied. Counselors and their supervisors, even though already heavily burdened, need to bear this in mind.

- It is important that rehabilitation counselors review suggested job changes at the job site to assure that clients are certified to tasks within their capabilities and that suggested promotions are consistent with mental retardation.

- Counselors need to remember that IQ, grade level completed, and reading achievement may have little relation to job success; and that good job performance does not guarantee social adequacy.

- Rehabilitation personnel will want to take the initiative in developing better understanding between themselves and employers as to the potential of retarded persons and how to set about evaluating, training, and placing them.

In planning for placement, counselors need to recall that a given retarded person may be able to hold a job requiring some independent judgments, since almost 40% of the jobs held by this group did require such judgments.

- Fortunately, the factors related to success with these clients, such as ability to take directions and to concentrate, can be readily evaluated on the job or in a workshop. The same is true of those related to failure: unacceptable social behavior, absenteeism and tardiness, and inability to perform job tasks.

## SUPPORTING FINDINGS

- Over 100 different jobs in about 40 Federal agencies are being performed by these retarded persons. 31% are white collar, 69% blue collar.

- Typically, they are young—about two-thirds were 20 to 24, and some were teenagers. However, a few were 60 or over. Nine out of 10 were single when employed, and three-fourths lived with parents or guardians.

- The ratio of men to women was four to one.

- Mean IQ was 73, with one-third below 70 and one-fifth above 79.

^ One-fourth were non-White and one-half from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their parents' occupations were mainly unskilled and semiskilled.

- 32% completed the 12th grade, 37% went no farther than the 9th. There was evidence that over one-half had been in special education programs.

- 45% had previous employment, and many others had workshop training or prevocation evaluations.

- 62% of those employed between 1964 and 1966 were still on the job in 1968. This turnover rate of only 38% during a 4-year period is considerably lower than for others in comparable Civil Service jobs, where the separation rate in fiscal year 1967 was 33% for those in the lower GS grades and over 50% in the Wage Board Classification jobs.

- Promotions or job reclassifications were made in 40% of the cases, chiefly to higher grade levels, indicating greater job mobility for the retarded than originally thought possible.

- Some trends indicate there is little relationship between job performance and such factors as IQ, grade level completed in school, or reading skills.

The two major causes of failure were absenteeism and unacceptable social behavior. In addition, inability to perform job tasks was a common reason for involuntary separation.

The three main services given clients by counselors were counseling and training in proper work habits, help with personal grooming, and counseling with parents or guardians.

- Supervisor's evaluation of client's ability to take directions, to follow through on tasks without becoming distracted, and to pace his work, was highly related to job success.

- Major unmet needs which, if satisfied, might have prevented failures; more helpful home environments, more realistic level of aspiration, more appropriate pre-employment training, and more community services to help the employees with off-the-job problems.

- Two-thirds of the counselors, personnel officers, and supervisors felt the concept of substituting counselor's judgment of the retarded person's employability for a qualifying exam should be extended to other handicapped groups.

- Secondary disabilities for this group were more frequently emotional than physical.

- While 42% of the jobs being performed did not require "use of own judgment" in performing tasks, 31% did require such judgments occasionally and 7% frequently.

- 55% of the supervisors reported these employees doing "very well" or "satisfactorily" during the first 30 days of work. This rose to 63% during the next 60 days and to 73% thereafter.

- 69% of these retarded workers said their parents, relatives, or spouses helped them most with off-the-job problems.

- Counselors, supervisors, and personnel officers agreed that over half of these employees were working at capacity; that three-fourths did not ask for promotions beyond their ability; but that 15% asked "once in a while" and 6% "often" for such promotions.

Further information on the final report itself, "A National Follow-Up Study of Mental Retardates Employed by the Federal Government" (RD-2425-G, 1968), can be obtained from the grantee: The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Government of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C. 2005. We are indebted to Mrs. Hedwig W. Oswald for the original draft of this Research Brief.