



Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on VR Program Management
RTAC
Institute for Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts Boston

**Request for Interest in Participating in a Research Project:
On Improving VR Program Management**

Letter of Intent Due: December 14, 2012
Materials Due: January 18, 2013

The purpose of the letter is to assist VR agencies to test out an approach to increasing their ability to identify performance or workforce development issues, develop and implement solutions and determine the impact of their efforts. The participating agencies will select an issue of importance to them, which should have a significant impact on their ability to provide effective VR services and achieve increased employment outcomes. The issue selected may be one an agency is already beginning to address, has started to consider, or has tried to address in the past. The RTAC will be guided by the VR Program Management Framework and use a Learning Collaborative process.

Improving the Knowledge Base on VR Program Management: The overall goal of the RTAC is to contribute to the knowledge base in specific areas of VR program management. NIDRR announced an RFP in December 2008:

The Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services announces a priority to establish, under the Disability and Rehabilitation Research Program (DRRP), a Research and Technical Assistance Center on Vocational Rehabilitation Program Management (Center). The Center must conduct research to develop a model of vocational rehabilitation (VR) program management, which must include a focus on quality assurance, strategic planning, and human resource management. The Center must then develop and test the model, and use it as the basis for training and technical assistance (TA) to improve management practices within individual State VR agencies. (US Department of Education, 2008, p.33)

The ICI was awarded the RTAC on October 1, 2009 and has conducted multiple activities including case studies of state VR agencies nominated by key stakeholders as well-managed VR agencies. At the CSAVR meeting in October 2011, Dr. Foley (co-PI), Mr. John Halliday and Mr. Robert Burns presented key findings, proposed a VR Program Management framework, and announced that the RTAC would launch a Learning

Collaborative on VR program management practices. The power point is available at <http://vr-rtac.org/?q=node/8>. In February 2012, eight State VR Agencies were selected to participate in the first round of the Learning Collaborative on VR program management practices. The RTAC will host a second cohort for the Learning Collaborative to further examine the VR Performance Management Framework in practice. On November 26th, 2012, the RTAC hosted an information session on the Learning Collaborative for the 2nd cohort. The webinar is archived at: <http://vr-rtac.org/?q=node/7>.

The research literature is limited in determining what quality assurance, human resource management, and strategic planning activities are linked to both VR management level outcomes (such as staff retention, performance of vendors, costs) and to employment outcomes of clients. The RTAC asserts that no one QA, SP, or HR activity should stand by itself nor that any one particular activity is superior without regard to the context in which it is implemented. The investigation of the eight state VR agencies in our case studies found that VR leaders focused directly or indirectly on eight key areas they employed to varying degrees to solve specific management challenges arising in their agencies. For example, the VR leaders talked not just about how to do better QA, but how to use QA information to affect such decisions as professional development, communication with stakeholders, business operations, and strategic planning. VR leaders displayed an action orientation and were demonstrating a style of experimentation. They valued strategies that enabled their agency to be nimble, flexible, and able to adapt to the changes inherent in operating in a state system. They all actively promoted and maintained good reputations with external partners and spoke of the frontline staff as their most important internal customer. We synthesized these findings and other related literature to form our VR Program Management Framework depicted below and provide more detail about each component.

Several key areas emerged as important from the first Learning Collaborative: communication, knowledge, and decentralized problem solving and decision-making. For example, there is a consistent interest and expansion of the use of data that may be tied to a steady increase in electronic case management systems. However, as state VR agencies invest in these systems questions about how to communicate this information are emerging. Should data be used only as performance management systems? How can data be used to share goals from leadership through to service delivery? In what ways are goals, knowledge, and data shared, communicated, and used in VR agencies? What data items needed by frontline counselors so that they can make better decisions about services? Another area is workforce and human resources. The workforce is quite variably defined depending upon the structure and nature of purchased services in VR agencies. State VR agencies are making different decisions about what is a vendor service, what is delivered directly, or what is an “in-house” contracted service. How does one mobilize a workforce that is not entirely under agency human resources influence?

VR Program Management Framework

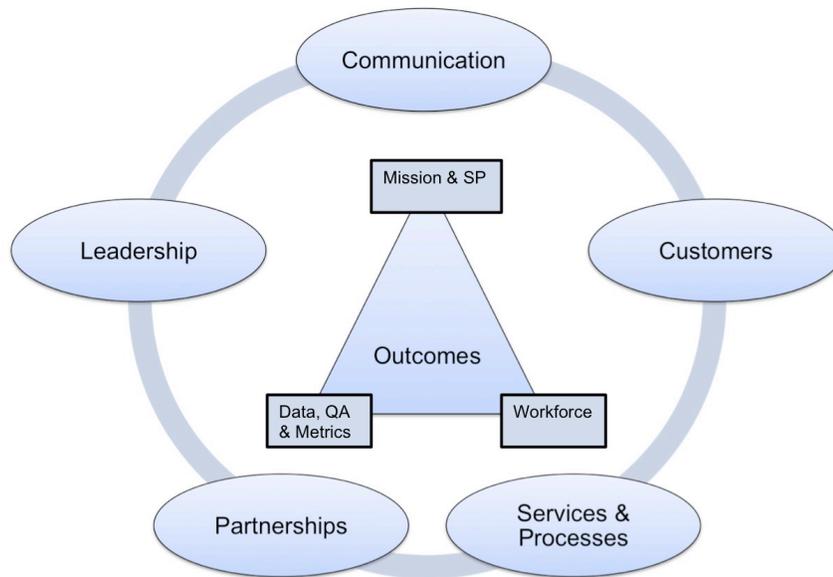


Image description: Triangle at center with text box - "Outcomes." Text boxes at each of the three triangle points: top - "Mission and SP," bottom right - "Workforce," bottom left - "Data, QA & Metrics." Ring surrounds the triangle with text boxes (clockwise) at top - "Communication," right - "Customers," bottom right - "Service & Processes," bottom left - "Partnerships" left - "Leadership."

Communication: The agency pursues multiple lines of communication and encourage staff at all levels of the organization to communicate information through formal and informal channels. Most importantly, the leadership presents clear expectations in both qualitative and quantitative outcomes. These outcomes are consistently highlighted internally and externally and are manifested through actions as well as words.

Customers: The staff at all levels understand and respond to the needs of multiple constituencies- clients, employers, providers, advocates, politicians, the general public within the framework of agency goals and values.

Data, Quality Assurance, and Metrics: The agency seeks to collect and use relevant information consistently that gets reported back to staff, clients, and other external constituents. The leadership and staff gather data in a way that maximizes usability and functionality but not to the point of overload or loss of relevance.

Leadership: The management team displays leadership through top-level commitment to defined goals and values and ensuring that all levels of staff get engaged and take ownership.

Mission and Strategic Planning: The leadership develops performance outcomes based on organizational goals that can be assessed whether met or not. While clarity of long-term focus is maintained, the leadership seeks maximum flexibility to attend to and respond to changing and dynamic external and internal circumstances (e.g., legislative priorities, funding, unanticipated problems requiring resolution).

Partnerships: The agency pursues relationships between individuals and organizations that are characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, with the specified goal of improving employment outcomes for their consumers.

Services and Processes: The agency looks at systems in an on-going performance improvement mode to maximize outcomes while retaining clinical quality and good customer service.

Workforce and Human Resources: The agency recruits and maintains an innovative and competent workforce at all levels that reflects the local population. The leadership and partners are able to support creative workforce redesign activities that respond to changing needs (e.g., is there a need for specific internal business development positions or is this activity best contracted out?).

What do we mean by Learning Collaborative: The RTAC adopted and adapted a learning collaborative method used in other fields (notably public health) to initiate a cross VR agency strategy for problem solving, identification and application of practice based solution, and evaluation of related outcomes. This method is a peer-to-peer knowledge exchange model that features strong evaluation components providing documentation of success. Features of the collaborative include face-to-face meetings, on-site and distance consultation, self-assessment, and tailored evaluation. Anticipated benefits include identification of workable solutions, space to innovate, new colleagues in other state VR agencies, use of critical skills, professional development opportunities, and the opportunity to pilot an effort before going to scale.

You will be asked to:

- a) Identify a lead person and a team with designated roles
- b) Participate in face to face meetings (at the expense of the ICI)
- c) Participate in on-site consultation and distance consultation
- d) Complete a pre- and post- self assessment
- e) Identify, launch, and complete an initiative (related to program management as described below) within 12 months (3/01/13 to 2/28/14)
- f) Participate in the design and conduct of evaluation activities
- g) Act as peer consultants to other members of the learning collaborative by suggesting solutions, identifying experts both within the VR agencies and networks, and describing past and current experience in similar efforts.
- h) Participate in telephone interviews approximately 30 to 90 days post learning collaborative on the value of the experience. An external evaluator not part of the RTAC will conduct these.

The RTAC will

- a) Host, organize and pay for learning collaborative meetings, webinars, phone conferences and similar communication strategies.
- b) Visit each agency at least three times in the year. Within the first month, the RTAC staff will visit to become familiar with specific efforts, discuss your self-assessment, and to consult with you about the plan for the year. Within the last quarter of the project, the RTAC staff will make one site visit to respond to needs, provide consultation on evaluation and sustainability components, and to seek feedback on the learning collaborative experience.
- c) Identify and pay for external consultants and experts on key topics identified by the learning collaborative members.
- d) Provide consultation and coaching on evaluation strategies.

Identifying a management issue: The RTAC intends to support up to eight State VR Agencies working on a management or leadership issue that utilizes the eight components in the VR Program Management Framework. Interested parties are encouraged to identify a project that can be completed in 12 months, would benefit from peer-to-peer exchange, and can be evaluated by the achievement of a specific outcome. The following are examples of topics that could be further defined into 12-month projects with an achievable outcome. You are not limited to these examples and are strongly encouraged to discuss the chosen topic with Dr. Susan Foley to determine appropriateness for the effort.

- Strategic use of inputs (i.e. needs assessment, state plan) in planning processes to improve client employment outcomes
- Assessing vendor performance
- Managing the demand for services, case flow, and outreach (i.e. OOS policy, targeted outreach)
- Enhancing service capacity through new or improved partnerships (i.e. employers)
- Improving efficiencies in specific business processes (i.e. procurement, onboarding new staff). Please note, in order avoid competition with other initiatives, we will not consider proposals on ROI
- Workforce development strategies leading to staff retention (i.e. succession planning, staff engagement, personnel role and function redesign)

Eligibility for Research Project:

Only State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies are eligible. All State VR Agencies including General, Combined, and Blind agencies and agencies operating in DC, Puerto Rico and the territories are eligible. We encourage each lead agency to consider including key partners as relevant to the selected management topic including but not limited to:

- Tribal Nation and American Indian programs
- Technical Assistance and Continuing Education (TACE) Centers
- Key personnel from other state agencies
- University partners such as evaluators or rehabilitation counseling faculty

- Statewide Rehabilitation Council members
- Independent Living Centers
- Advocacy groups
- Vendor associations

You should clearly define the role of the partner, any relevant past efforts, and how the partnership will assist in the achievement of the targeted outcome. Include this effort in the sections provided in the narrative.

How to Participate:

- 1. Letter of Intent:** A letter of interest is due by **December 14th, 2012 by 11:59pm** EST addressed to Julisa Cully at julisa.cully@umb.edu. The letter should include the following items:
 - i.** Name, phone number, and email of contact person for future correspondence.
 - ii.** Description of selected topic not to exceed 300 words.
 - iii.** Specify the goal or outcome of the activity that will be achieved within 12 months. Not to exceed 50 words.
 - iv.** Indicate whether or not you request a consultation call.
- 2. Receipt of Letter of Interest:** You will receive an email confirmation of receipt of letter of interest within 24 hours. If you do not receive the confirmation, please contact Julisa Cully at julisa.cully@umb.edu.
- 3. Materials Needed:** We will review the letters of interest and select those that will meet inclusion criteria. You will receive a response email by December 17th that includes a link to the materials templates. All of the following materials must be submitted electronically by January 18th 2013 by 11:59 pm EST to be considered.
 - i. Letter of Commitment (LOC) from VR Director:** This LOC should be short (1 -2 pages) on official letterhead with the director's signature and indicate firm commitment for the VR agency to join the Learning Collaborative for one 12-month period and for support to complete activities as defined in the narrative.

Materials and Content:

- ii. Narrative:** You will be guided through the narrative section by a series of open-ended questions in a web-based form housed by SurveyGizmo.com. These questions will include:
 1. Description of the Management Issue and How a Learning Collaborative Strategy May Advance the Effort
 2. Intended Activities, Objectives, Outcomes, and Goals
 3. Related Past Efforts
 4. Relationship to the Eight Factors in the VR Program Management Framework
 5. Technical Assistance Needs
 6. Evaluation Capacities and Needs
 7. Potential Barriers and Challenges
- iii. Roster Table:** This table will be a listing of personnel who are participating in the project and include their names, titles, contact information, and project

role. One individual must be designated as the primary lead. You will be asked to designate at least 2 individuals that will be expected to participate in face-to-face meetings. These individuals should have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the project. Please note that the Agency Director and Field Service Director will be expected to attend in-person TA meeting at the agency.

- iv. Budget:** The RTAC will support each of eight state VR agencies up to \$50,000. Please complete the budget template and short narrative description. Allowable items include personnel and associated costs (i.e., fringe), consultants, travel (other than that paid for by the RTAC), telephone, office supplies, indirect limited to the federally negotiated rate, and other costs with compelling reason for inclusion. Items not allowed include: computers, software, and electronic equipment and national travel not related to the proposed project. The RTAC staff will review budgets and make the final determination of allowable costs. You are encouraged to contact Julisa Cully with questions regarding budget items.

*Each section will have word limits. We anticipate that the entire narrative section will require approximately 10-12 pages of text.

Consultation: You are strongly encouraged to contact the RTAC staff and take advantage of the opportunity to discuss ideas and seek guidance on how to refine materials or inquire about the research project.

Key Contact People:

Dr. Susan Foley: Susan.Foley@umb.edu

John Halliday: John.Halliday@umb.edu

Robert Burns: robert.burns@umb.edu

Julisa Cully: Julisa.cully@umb.edu