



# Promising Practices Brief

## Hiring Diverse Providers

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### Mission:

To increase employment opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities nationwide

### Based at:

University of Hawaii  
at Manoa, Center on  
Disability Studies

### In collaboration with:

Hawaii Centers for  
Independent Living  
Hawaii Vocational  
Rehabilitation and  
Services for the Blind  
Division

### Funded by:

U.S. Department of  
Education  
Rehabilitation Services  
Administration

### Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to illustrate the coordination of services, one of the promising practices for serving Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (APIs) with disabilities identified in a nationwide survey of rehabilitation administrators. It was developed as part of a series of promising practice briefs. As part of a continuing effort to increase employment opportunities for the population we serve, the National Technical Assistance Center for APIs with disabilities (NTAC-AAPI) distributed a survey to rehabilitation administrators across the United States. Of the 80 state agencies surveyed in 2005, 34 agencies responded (42.5%). The results of that survey are currently being used to guide and enhance rehabilitation service provision.

### Introduction

Demographic studies show that the composition of the population in the United States is more culturally and linguistically diverse than it has ever been (Bruyère, 2001). Moreover, as the number of persons with disabilities grows, so too does the number of persons of color living with a disability. Bruyère (2001) believes minority persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the nation's unemployed, and their employment outlook is bleak. Minority individuals with disabilities thus may face a double whammy. The Oregon Institute on Disability & Development (n.d.) explains that minorities with disabilities face challenges common to those with a disability, but they also face barriers specific to individuals from a particular cultural background. Furthermore, minority women with a disability may face a triple whammy due to the influence of gender bias. That double or triple whammy may again grow exponentially, if the minority individual with a disability utilizes a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor who is unfamiliar with his or her culture.

Minority persons with disabilities may benefit from diversity initiatives in many ways, but having vocational rehabilitation counselors they can talk to in a native language or relate to is clearly one of the most important. Perhaps, by employing rehabilitation providers from diverse backgrounds, the high number of diverse rehabilitation consumers may not need to face a magnified double or triple whammy.

## **Diversity**

A major complicating factor of diversity programs and hiring diverse individuals is that employers and organizations define 'diversity' differently. Some employers only address race or gender discrimination when focusing on diversity. However, the term diversity can actually encompass several different dimensions, including race and gender, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, and disability status. Gresing-Pophal (2002) discovered only 64% of companies include disability issues in their diversity initiatives. Furthermore, there is the distinct possibility that employers may not be aware of nor completely appreciate individuals being diverse in more than just one way.

## **Valuing vs. Managing Diversity**

All employers need to manage or work with employees' diversity. "It's up to management to make sure there is equity and fair treatment going on" says Joy Relton, an assistive technology specialist for Unisys Corporation in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania (cited in Gresing-Pophal, 2002). She continues, "It's not asking for a free lunch; it's asking for something [the employee is] entitled to." Company managers need to effectively manage diversity; however, this can only occur if they first value diversity. Valuing diversity involves recognizing and appreciating the differences of individuals and, then, managing that diversity by emphasizing the development of company policies, goals, and a company culture that optimizes the productivity of all employees by understanding their unique needs, motivations, and contributions (Bruy're, 2001).

## **Supporting Diversity: State Governments**

In the interim report on best practices for the employment of people with disabilities in state government, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (2004) highlights four states – Florida, Maryland, Vermont, and Washington – that promote the hiring, retention and promotion of individuals with disabilities in state government jobs. Two of the best practices identified, which the EEOC recommends replicating and which seem particularly relevant for employers of rehab professionals, can make the difference between success and failure in efforts to hire diverse individuals with disabilities. These best practices include:

- Including individuals with disabilities in all diversity initiatives, targeted outreach and recruiting efforts, and
- Utilizing a "must interview" strategy - Vermont already does in state government jobs - for individuals with a disability who meet the minimum qualifications.

A "must interview" strategy means that if an individual with a disability can perform the essential functions of the job in question, employers are required by law to interview that person. He or she is not guaranteed the job; however, they are at least guaranteed an interview. The supports mentioned above are innovative state government employment practices. Similar employment strategies can be implemented in for-profit businesses to enhance both diversity outcomes and profitability.

## **Innovating Businesses**

Persons with disabilities, including minority persons with disabilities, make positive contributions in the workplace and to the success of a business. Businesses may be receptive to employing individuals with disabilities; however, they may not know how to make company policies and environments attractive and welcoming to diverse job-seekers. Bruy're (2001) lists several strategies that may both further diversity initiatives and assist with the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Specifically, to maximize human resources to enhance workplace outcomes, she recommends:

- Diversity initiatives that include active recruitment and retention of individuals of all backgrounds with disabilities in the workplace through collaborative agreements with state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies or local job placement services for individuals with disabilities;
- Development of targeted job programs for minorities with disabilities;
- Development of mentoring programs for persons with disabilities;
- Making training, development, and promotional opportunities available to all minorities seeking job advancement; and
- Integration of the nondiscrimination requirements of the ADA and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act for persons with disabilities in all facets of staff training and human resources practices.

These recommendations indicate how diversity initiatives can benefit state governments and businesses, but do the same recommendations apply to Vocational Rehabilitation? Some states' rehabilitation programs have recognized the benefits of having a diverse workforce and strive to maintain one – namely, Michigan and Illinois.

## **Michigan**

Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) understands the importance of diversity. Chapter 2 of Employment Rehabilitation Services in Michigan (2000) states all MRS staff have received training in cultural diversity awareness. MRS developed and implemented a multicultural policy several years ago. MRS also convened a multicultural/diversity committee to develop a plan for recruiting candidates from minority backgrounds to staff positions and as a result, their staff is becoming more diverse. A diverse staff relates to increased satisfaction of customers – rehab consumers - from minority backgrounds because they have a counselor who can speak to them in their own language and relate to their cultural differences.

MRS has also established a new committee, the Minority Issues Committee, to bridge the outcome gap that exists between minority and majority client populations. Far more majority rehab consumers' cases are closed successfully than minority rehab consumers.

## **Illinois**

The Illinois Division of Rehabilitation Services also understands the need for a diverse workforce (Adams & Kilbury, 2005). They maintain rehabilitation counseling staff with expertise in communicating with diverse populations. For example, a group of Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf, since sign language is frequently considered a foreign language, are employed throughout the state. These individuals are fluent in sign language (ASL) and conversant with deaf culture, and provide the full range of vocational rehabilitation services to individuals who are deaf. The Bureau of Blind Services employs rehabilitation counselors and rehabilitation instructors who are professionally qualified to provide rehabilitation services to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. DRS in Illinois strongly encourages the use of Braille as part of training for those counselors who serve individuals who are blind. All written materials produced by DRS are made available in Braille, as are copies of all DRS forms used by customers. In addition, DRS employs rehabilitation counselors and rehabilitation case coordinators who are qualified to communicate with individuals who communicate in a language other than English. In Illinois, staff are tested in order to qualify for bilingual positions.

At times, however, DRS has difficulty locating staff who meet the degree requirements for a rehabilitation counselor and who also speak another language or are fluent in sign language. DRS allows individuals who possess these skills yet lack a related college degree to be employed as social service career trainees if they are enrolled in a graduate program that will enable them to eventually meet the degree standard and become a

rehabilitation counselor. This training option has proven very successful in helping DRS provide services to diverse populations.

While the numbers of individuals who communicate in certain languages may be relatively small, DRS believes it is equally important to be able to communicate effectively with them about their rehabilitation needs. The Illinois Department of Human Services maintains a computerized resource directory which includes information on translation services for a variety of languages, including Polish, Vietnamese and Arabic. DRS counselors can link with these resources to provide translation services. In addition, DRS has piloted the use of a telephone-based translation service which can provide instant translations in over 100 languages. This service requires only the use of two telephones. When professional translators are not available, moreover, DRS works with family members or volunteer translators from community groups or religious organizations who can assist the individual consumer.

## Author Notes

James D. Brightman is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor, earned a Specialist's degree in Adult Education and completed coursework for a Ph.D. in Rehabilitation Counseling.

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