

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

This issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* focuses on people with mental retardation and the outlook for their employment. Within the past 15 years there has been a movement away from exclusively sheltered employment toward integrated employment with and without support. In many ways the past decade and a half have been among the most positive for individuals with mental retardation because their ability to work competitively is for the first time being seriously realized. This is a very large group of people in the United States and throughout the world who have tremendous potential that has been underutilized and grossly wasted.

Those professionals who take the time to get to know individuals who have been labeled as mentally retarded will rapidly discern their work capabilities. It may well be that one of the reasons that job coaches are particularly effective change agents is because they interact on a regular basis with people who are considered mentally retarded, thereby getting to know them and their preferences, aptitudes, and potential better than the counselor or evaluator who visits only infrequently. One message that comes out of helping individuals with mental retardation work is the necessity to listen closely to what they want and to rely heavily on what family members tell us as professionals about the capabilities of their son or daughter. Gradually, professionals and advocates in the field are beginning to get the message to listen to individuals with disabilities and their family members when blueprinting the best course for them.

This issue of *JVR* is particularly unique because it carries with it a number of major cutting-edge papers that define and document where we are today and where we need to go in employment service delivery for people with mental retardation. The shift in emphasis from prevocational and vocational training into employment services, placement with support, and job maintenance and retention is a not so subtle one that has had tremendous implications for the way in which people who have mental retardation have come to see themselves. It is also important to note that we are moving away from the concept of just getting a job, any job, into the much broader and richer

perception of career development and advancement instead. Unfortunately, these concepts are taking too long, but with the help of consumers and their families serving as the collective conscience of professionals progress will ensue sooner rather than later.

I have chosen to serve as not only the editor but also the guest editor for this issue because mental retardation is a topic that has been near and dear to my heart for over 20 years. Dr. John Kregel and I have developed a paper to serve as the kickoff for this issue. The article attempts to provide a framework for a national agenda on supported employment and is a much more in-depth and longer version of the earlier summary statement published in the May issue of *ADVANCE*, The American Association for Persons in Supported Employment Newsletter. In this agenda we have sketched out what I consider to be major goals that those of us interested in integrated employment and supported employment outcomes for people with severe disabilities should target. The article has been written in a very positive and constructive vein, and we would welcome modification, suggestions, and revisions that bring it closer to target goals in the field.

In the second article Dr. Sharon Davis, from the National Association of Retarded Citizens (NARC) has developed a paper that profiles the status of individuals with mental retardation in employment in the 1990s, drawing heavily on a number of major national studies to date. Dr. Davis does a wonderful job of charting where we are in the United States today. The results are mixed at best. On one hand we have many reasons to be pleased and gratified with the progress; on the other hand most of us would agree that we can do better—and need to do much better and in a much more expeditious and timely fashion.

The third paper is an outstanding article by Rucker and Browder that addresses conversion from segregated employment to integrated employment. It is my personal belief that this issue is the primary stumbling block for individuals in mental retardation who wish to participate much more extensively in supported employment. There are tens of thousands of people locked in sheltered workshops and adult activity centers.

Rucker and Browder provide a hard look at the issues around the complexities of conversion.

In another paper West and his colleagues cleverly illustrate through a case study format the effectiveness of a variety of natural supports in a food service environment for an individual with severe retardation who has been competitively employed for approximately 15 consecutive years. In addition to the strategies it provides, this paper is a useful reminder that many individuals in supported employment have ongoing needs for help and assistance throughout their job tenure. Next, Inge and Dymond report a single-subject study that reflects a changing criterion strategy for a person working in supported employment. This is a tangible way to help accelerate performance.

In an effort to look at how to expand the concept of natural supports in organizations, Cary Griffin has written an excellent article that those involved in service delivery issues will find very helpful.

Finally, Wolfe, Boone, and Buggey present an insightful article related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and how businesses feel about the ADA. Generally speaking, the ADA has been associated more with people with physical disabilities, but it must be remembered that it covers *all* disabilities. Individuals with mental retardation can and will benefit from this sweeping civil right legislation, but consumers and their families as well as advocates and professionals must be aware of how the ADA can impact individuals with mental retardation. This final article pro-

vides an important emphasis on the role of the ADA.

In summary, the array of assembled articles provides a nice cross section of philosophical and policy positions along with some practical and applied research efforts. This issue is directed to professionals, consumers, and advocates who are concerned with the employment outcome of individuals with mental retardation. Tremendous strides have been made in helping individuals with mental retardation leave institutions and gain entrance to community life; however, developing a career with good pay and benefits is an important goal in the full community integration of individuals with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. This goal has only begun to be addressed, and it is hoped that this issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* will help spur on additional efforts in this area, particularly at the state and local level. It is my fervent belief that efforts at improving service delivery for individuals with mental retardation must be more significantly focused on what happens at the state agency and local program levels. People with mental retardation highly depend on the policy, funding, and practice directions that these agencies promote. As advocates, we must voice our concerns if we are not pleased with the directions of these agencies. I believe that a number of the articles within this issue will help achieve this advocacy.

Paul Wehman, PhD