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Introduction

The increased involvement of persons with disabilities in supported and competitive employment represents one of the most dramatic and long overdue changes in vocational rehabilitation. Concurrent with this initiative have been intensive efforts to prepare consumers to competently respond to the many demands of their work environments.

One skills area — health and safety — is beginning to receive increased attention from job coaches, transition specialists, educators, and researchers. As more individuals with disabilities are placed into community work sites, it becomes increasingly clear that they may be exposed to a number of hazards present in the work environment. These individuals may be unable to identify, avoid, or correct the hazards. Indeed, available data suggests that many persons with disabilities are not adequately prepared to respond appropriately to the risks present in community environments and are entering the work force with little or no instruction in work safety. Furthermore, most transition and employment preparation programs have been delivered in relatively 'safe' environments in which risks were few or nonexistent and a staff member was always present to correct or modify a potentially risky situation. Such placements did, of course, restrict the types and availability of work opportunities for individuals and prevented them from engaging in work they otherwise would be able to perform. As Wolfensberger said over 20 years ago, such denial endangers an individual's dignity and prevents him or her from experiencing the risk-taking of ordinary life.

To prepare persons with disabilities for normative functioning at work, they must not be shielded

from the risks of their jobs but taught to handle such risks adaptively. This is not to suggest that individuals should be intentionally placed in work situations where there is a high probability of injury. But it does indicate that they should at least be exposed to and learn about situations and behaviors associated with work injury. Failure to do this will only limit their access to marketable employment.

This special issue of the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation directly addresses the topic of work safety, an area that has largely been neglected in the transition and supported employment literature. Because work environments may have potential risks and staff may not be present to correct risk situations, consumers must be taught strategies that will enable them to respond appropriately to such risks. Failure to provide them with such skills not only limits their employability but may put them in a potentially dangerous situation.

The issue's first article examines the causes of work accidents among supported employees and presents data derived from a national survey on the types of injuries that result from these causes. Although the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, reports the nature of injuries and illnesses across occupations, information on the types of injuries supported employees sustain is unavailable. It is hoped that this investigation will provide an initial data base in this area of study.

To ensure that consumers are prepared to adequately respond to work hazards, it is imperative that they receive systematic and valid training in work safety. The article by Madison and Agran

reports the findings of a national survey in which respondents were asked to describe the type of safety-skills training consumers received. Among the questions addressed were: Who provides this training? Where is it delivered? What content is presented? What instructional formats are used? The findings provide insight on the extent to which respondents deliver safety-skills training and their specific concerns regarding training.

The article by Martella and Marchand-Martella provides a perspective on work safety that has received limited attention. This perspective covers the opinions of consumers, business people, and vocational rehabilitation counselors about the importance of safety-skills training. Specifically, a consumer, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a business manager who employs individuals with disabilities, and an insurance agent who insures a business that employs individuals with disabilities were interviewed.

The article by Agran, Madison and Bown describes the effects of a safety-skills training program in which five supported employees with moderate to severe disabilities were taught selected safe work behaviors. A problem-solving strategy was taught, and data on skill acquisition and durability are presented.

In addition to instructing consumers on how to respond appropriately to job risks, concentrated efforts must be made to guarantee that persons with medical and health needs receive appropriate services at their places of employment. Conley's article describes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) ruling on not having an individual's disability or health problem interfere with hiring and employment. Mason and

colleagues discuss the issue of providing supported employment services to persons with HIV/AIDS. They suggest that supported employment may be appropriate for many persons with HIV/AIDS, but it is an option not widely recognized by professionals in vocational rehabilitation.

Teaching individuals with disabilities to recognize unsafe work conditions and prevent work injuries represents a programmatic topic of critical importance. Likewise, ensuring that individuals with medical needs receive appropriate supported employment services is of comparable importance.

Appreciation is extended to the contributing authors for their informative and insightful articles. Health and safety represents an area that has long been neglected, and the time has come to address it.

Martin Agran

About the Editor

Martin Agran, PhD, is the chair of the severe disabilities teacher preparation program in the Department of Special Education at Utah State University. Dr. Agran has served as a principal investigator for several federally funded personnel preparation and research projects. He has published in a number of professional journals and texts, written several books on transition and supported employment, served as an editor for numerous professional journals, served as a consultant for several transition projects, and served as a Fulbright Scholar to the Czech Republic.