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## Introduction

Supported employment has served as a major vehicle for thousands of people with significant disabilities to demonstrate their competence and to gain access to the competitive labor force. Interest and demand for community integrated competitive employment with supports is expanding with service providers in every state in the nation. Yet, supported employment continues to serve only a small percentage of the individuals who could benefit from this service. To date, national and local implementation efforts are slowing and investment in this change appears to have waned. National systems change efforts have resulted in the addition of supported employment to the continuum of traditional rehabilitation services options. Thus, supported employment is becoming embedded into a rehabilitation service system predicated on a past history of providing services to persons with severe disabilities in congregate, segregated environments. This approach is polar opposite to the basic premise of supported employment. If supported employment is ultimately going to expand and improve then a plan for orchestrating change and working together must be developed.

A renewed sense of commitment to supported employment must occur if this service option is going to grow and expand. In addition, a coordinated advocacy effort must be put into place with individuals with disabilities and their families leading the charge. Professionals will need to work together with the customers of their service to ensure that people with significant disabilities are able to achieve the community integrated competitive employment outcomes that they seek.

An eighth national symposium, sponsored by the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabil-

tation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment became part of the plan for orchestrating change. The collective task of the symposium planning committee was to create an environment that provided for the exchange of new ideas related to making supported employment available to anyone interested. A major challenge for the symposium planning committee members was to assemble a diverse group of participants that were interested and committed to the ideals of supported employment.

After careful evaluation we now know that the Eighth National Symposium on Supported Employment met and surpassed our original goals. This national event brought together a diverse group of participants that were able to effectively network, share information on current issues, develop new strategies, learn innovative techniques and establish a national agenda for supported employment. While we are not solely crediting this symposium for the new energy and excitement in our field, because there have been many outstanding supported employment training opportunities occurring across the country, we do believe that it played an important role.

Planning an event like the national symposium is a time consuming arduous task. During the year preceding the actual event decisions are made and contracts are written that will effect the ultimate success or failure of a conference. Due to the complex nature of this task many agencies and organizations have started to contract with national conference planning companies to provide this service. Over the last several years the RRTC symposium planning committee has thoughtfully weighed the pros and cons related to

contracting out for conference planning services. As appealing as this idea is to many of us within the Training Division who are responsible for all the logistical arrangements, in the end the idea is always voted down because we strongly believe that high quality personnel training events are directly linked to knowing the customer-base and ensuring that their needs are met. Our specialized customer knowledge drives the one hundred and one decisions necessary for the development and implementation of a successful symposium.

### *Conference design*

In addition to this strong customer-driven philosophy and commitment there were several unique factors that directly contributed to the success of the Eighth National Symposium. The first ingredient for success was the overall design of the conference including the presentation strands and agenda. The title of this benchmark symposium was, No detours: Dignity and self-esteem through supported employment. To accompany this theme a conference design was constructed that created an environment where participants could gain new information, as well as participate in dynamic discussions on some of the critical issues facing the field of supported employment. During each of the concurrent sessions participants were able to select from a traditional information training session, a meeting format, or a crackerbarrel information exchange session. A broad range of topics were offered during each of the concurrent sessions. The session topics were organized under one of the following training strands: business partnerships; transition planning and implementation; supported employment implementation; managing community service delivery; self-advocacy leadership; international supported employment; and applications to research. Both the supported employment implementation strand and the self-advocacy leadership strand were designed as intensive 2-day overview training events where participants could expand their knowledge base and earn a certificate of participation.

### *Participation by people with disabilities*

For the first time, the VCU-RRTC symposium was able to attract significant representation from people with disabilities. If people with disabilities are going to lead the charge of supported employment then they need to attend the conferences, symposiums, and planning meetings where strategies are developed. Attracting approximately 150 people with disabilities (represents 20% of participants) did not happen by chance. During the initial stages of the symposium planning process meetings were held with local and national disability organizations to develop strategies for increasing the representation of people with disabilities at the symposium. Some of the strategies that proved to be the most successful included: locating an accessible conference site; contracting with people with disabilities to serve in leadership positions; delivering a 2-day self-advocacy leadership institute during the symposium; developing a participant services committee designed to address all conference questions and issues; providing a limited array of personal assistance services; developing a directory of local organizations and companies to ensure that all individuals attending the symposium were able to fully participate in all activities.

### *International representation*

A third factor that contributed to the success of the symposium was having a large contingent of participants from outside of the United States. With approximately 80 individuals participating from countries such as Italy, Ireland, United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, Portugal, Canada, Finland and the Netherlands new and enlightening ideas were developed for expanding supported employment. This talented group of international visitors added a wonderful dimension to the symposium. Participants throughout this three day event commented on the interesting conversations that they were having with the international supported employment participants.

### *Identifying co-sponsors*

Developing co-sponsors for the symposium was a fourth factor that helped to ensure success for the symposium. Each of the co-sponsors offered a unique contribution and shared in the development and implementation of the symposium. Corporate sponsorship was expanded to include NationsBank, Signet Bank, Eskimo Pie, Knights of Columbus, Bush Gardens and the Farm Fresh Charitable Foundation, these companies offered scholarships for participants. These scholarships were designed to off-set the expenses related to attending a conference providing us with a strategy to ensure diversity of participants. Individuals who indicated that they were in immediate need of supported employment information received scholarships on a first come first serve basis. The Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) and the DRS Virginia Assistive Technology Project (VATS) both served as co-sponsors and provided leadership and funding to assist with selection of speakers, personal care assistant services, and in a variety of other areas to enhance conference accessibility for all participants. In addition, the local Independent Living Center (ILC) in Norfolk, Virginia worked closely with RRTC staff as a co-sponsor throughout the entire planning year. The ILC assisted in the development and delivery of the self-advocacy leadership institute strand and developed a directory of local companies and organizations that could be distributed through the participant services desk at the symposium. The Virginia Association of Persons in Supported Employment (APSE) co-sponsorship assisted the RRTC with the development

of the symposium agenda and with the many on-site logistical arrangements that are vital in the delivery of a high quality personnel training event of this size. Each of the symposium's co-sponsors offered unique qualities that continue to distinguish the Eighth National Symposium.

### *Utilization of advisory board*

The final factor that contributed to the success of the symposium was expanding the role of our Advisory Board members. The VCU-RRTC is fortunate to have an outstanding Advisory Board dedicated to the field of supported employment. For the first time, all advisory board members were asked to deliver a presentation at the symposium in their content area. The training sessions delivered by these board members were some of the highest rated sessions by symposium participants. Our Advisory Board's commitment and dedication to improving and expanding supported employment was evident to all who attended their sessions.

On a personal note we both feel extremely fortunate to work with such a talented and dedicated group of co-workers. Everyone who works at the RRTC participants in the symposium in some fashion. However, if it was not for the expertise and hard work of personnel training professionals like Pat Brown-Glover, Katherine Inge, Amy Armstrong, Karen Flippo, Howard Green, Jeanne Roberts and Jan Smith we would have been unable to achieve the notable outcomes that we continue to realize.

*Valerie Brooke and Michael Barcus*