

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

Just a few short years ago, individuals with developmental and other severe disabilities faced tremendous obstacles when attempting to access vocational rehabilitation services and obtain employment in their local communities. Traditionally viewed as ineligible for vocational rehabilitation services due to the severity of their handicaps, these persons were likely to earn token wages performing menial tasks in work activity or adult activity centers. Today, however, many thousands of these individuals are able to earn significant wages in integrated community settings through participation in a new rehabilitation alternative termed supported employment.

Supported employment began as a philosophical commitment to improve the employment outcomes of individuals with severe handicaps and provide an alternative to segregated, congregate settings such as workshops and activity centers. Supported employment is now a major national initiative with its own technology, enabling legislation, and steady funding stream. In its simplest form, supported employment provides paid employment in integrated work settings to individuals previously excluded from meaningful employment opportunities. Its success lies in the provision of intense, individualized training and support during the initial stages of employment and ongoing assistance to enable an individual to maintain employment for extended periods of time.

The federal state-supported employment initiative, through the historic provisions of Title VI-C of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 (P.L. 99-506), has had remarkable success in developing new employment options for individuals with severe disabilities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Over 2,000 new supported employment programs have been established since 1986. Many states have effectively leveraged funds from a variety of federal, state, and local sources to sustain supported employment services. As a result, over 32,000 individuals were participating in supported employment in 1988, and it can be

readily assumed that participants now number more than 50,000.

While much has been accomplished, much more remains to be done. State rehabilitation agencies, as well as local supported employment programs, are grappling with an array of challenges that may jeopardize the continued growth of the program or even threaten to reverse the gains that have been made. The articles contained in this issue serve to both (1) document the success of the supported employment movement to date and (2) identify problems and recommend strategies that will improve the quality of supported employment services.

In the first paper, Shafer, Revell, and Isbister present a summary of nationwide efforts to develop and implement supported employment programs. They provide a critical review of current state policies, public expenditures, and program outcomes. Their findings are extremely significant in that they provide a clear benchmark from which to judge the future growth and improvement of supported employment service delivery in all 50 states.

Supported employment requires major changes in many facets of each state's service delivery system. Mank, Buckley, and Rhodes summarize the challenges facing individual states through their analysis of the technical assistance needs of state-supported employment projects. The issues they identify—particularly increased employer participation, expansion of the types of individuals able to participate in supported employment, and the urgent need for the development of quality assurance systems—provide a clear direction for immediate actions needed to improve our nation's supported employment programs.

Supported employment programs are often criticized for their seeming inability to enable individuals to maintain employment for any significant period of time. The case studies provided by Flynn and his colleagues provide pragmatic solutions to this problem. They describe feasible alternatives that hold tremendous potential for improving the long-term job maintenance of individuals with severe disabilities.

Parent and her colleagues address an issue that is rapidly becoming a major priority for the field—the extent to which individuals participating in supported employment are truly integrated into their community-based employment settings. The Vocational Integration Index is an instrument designed for use by job coaches or other supported employment personnel to guarantee that individuals placed through supported employment programs are not isolated or segregated while on the job. Its purpose is twofold: (1) to assess the potential of a specific employment setting for physical and social integration both on and off the job site; and (2) measure the extent to which an employee is taking advantage of the opportunities for integration that exist in a specific job.

Kregel, Banks, and Hill describe a strategy for dealing with another emerging supported employment issue. They report the results of an analysis designed to predict the likelihood that an individual will retain a job in a supported employment setting as well as predict the costs of serving a particular individual. The Client-Job Compatibility Screening Instrument attempts to determine the extent to which the demands and supports available in a specific employment setting match the strengths and abilities of a potential employee.

Current state implementation efforts are moving beyond simply demonstrating that

supported employment is a workable concept to focusing on improving the quality and effectiveness of supported employment programs. In the final article, Mank and his colleagues propose an excellent model for individual states as they attempt to develop and implement quality assurance systems for supported employment programs. Major strengths of their approach are its emphasis on individual satisfaction and employment outcomes, consumer involvement in the quality assurance process, and strategies through which states can use the results of program evaluation activities to drive technical assistance and program improvement.

Collectively, the papers in this issue provide a clear picture of the present status of supported employment implementation. Supported employment has unquestionably become a viable rehabilitation alternative that is having a dramatic effect on the lives of thousands of individuals. Yet, like any new initiative, implementation problems remain to be addressed through creative and innovative approaches. Hopefully, the ideas and solutions discussed in these papers will be a springboard to future efforts to bring individuals with developmental and other severe disabilities into the economic mainstream of our society.

*John Kregel, Ed.D.
Issue Editor*