

Guest Editorial

Adult rehabilitation training programs and support services: A collaborative, person-centered approach

Despite substantial policy and system change efforts to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities, disabled Americans still experience higher rates of unemployment, lower average earnings, limited access to employee benefits, disproportionately higher representation in lower-skilled jobs, and higher rates of poverty than their nondisabled peers [1]. Gajar reports that the percentage of youth in postsecondary schools reporting a disability has increased in recent years [2]. Although rates of employment have improved over the past decade for people with disabilities, a wide gulf remains between this group and the rest of the population. The National Organization on Disabilities [1] reports that only 35 percent of persons with disabilities are employed compared with 78 percent of the nondisabled population. Awareness regarding accessibility issues faced by youth with disabilities seeking postsecondary education and employment has grown in recent years, and society widely accepts that a key barrier preventing successful outcomes after they leave school is the lack of adequate transition planning [3].

The Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), founded in 1858, is the nation's most diverse and comprehensive education, rehabilitation, and service delivery system serving children and adults who are deaf, blind, and multidisabled. AIDB provides seamless, coordinated, and comprehensive education and rehabilitation services, as well as employment opportunities for children and adults of all ages with hearing and vision loss. AIDB provides traditional and nontraditional programs in residential, home, and community environments. Alabama residents receive all services at no charge, and individuals from other states and countries receive services for a fee. Children and youth ages 3 to 21 are served through the Alabama School for the Deaf, Alabama School for the Blind, and the Helen Keller School (for children with multiple disabilities). Nine regional centers throughout Alabama serve people from birth and all through life, including seniors, by



Dr. Terry Graham (upper)

President, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, Talladega, AL

Dr. John Mascia (lower)

Executive Director, Gentry Technical Facility, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, Talladega, AL

providing specialized clinical, educational, and rehabilitative services. The Alabama Industries for the Blind offers employment opportunities for persons who are blind and visually impaired in community settings at manufacturing facilities in Talladega and Birmingham and through retail store operations on military installations in three states. The Gentry Technical Facility, also part of the AIDB network, is AIDB's headquarters for providing vocational and nonvocational rehabilitation services and support to individuals age 16 and older.

The mission of the Gentry Facility is to provide quality services leading to maximum independence and employment for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, blind, or deaf-blind. The staff and students at AIDB believe that all people who are deaf, blind, and deaf-blind can learn the skills necessary to reach their maximum potential and to compete and succeed in the community of their choice. The AIDB community values and promotes an accessible environment that respects the dignity, rights, and diverse needs of people who are deaf, blind, or deaf-blind.

Gentry, along with the network of AIDB's nine statewide regional centers and with strong collaboration with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS), provides individuals who are deaf, blind, or multidisabled with the opportunity to receive education training and community-based experiences that help them transition from school to work or from one career to another as their interests and support needs change. Gentry and its service-delivery partners have adopted a person-centered approach to develop and guide services. The underlying assumption is that the individual requesting the services determines the needs and desired service outcomes. All services are driven by the individual's wants, needs, and preferences that are used in developing a plan of action. This individual plan is the foundation on which to build goals, objectives, and desired outcomes for an individual service [4]. An example of a specific person-centered approach is Personal Futures Planning (PFP). PFP is a process that helps individuals describe their lives now and what they hope for in the future. This process is accomplished with the use of a series of maps or visual records developed by the person or

significant people in his or her life. These maps identify people, things, and dreams that are important to the person [5]. An example of typical maps that may be used in Drs. Mount and Zwernick's PFP process include but are not limited to [5]—

1. A background map (what are the important events in the person's life).
2. A relationship map (who are the important people in this person's life—this is an important question when natural supports are needed at home or on the job).
3. A preferences map (what the person likes and dislikes).

The goal of the Gentry staff is to combine the traditional educational approach to learning with a more adult-friendly experiential model of teaching and learning. Many Gentry participants benefit from center-based classes in subjects that include basic education, GED (General Equivalency Diploma) and college preparation courses, orientation and mobility, Braille classes, home management and personal grooming, tutorials in assistive technology, sign language, basic English, and computer-based job searches. Gentry's objective is to make what students learn in their classes come alive while applying their newfound knowledge to real-life experiences. The AIDB campus has several apartments where participants can live independently and practice the skills they learned in their Home Management classes. This opportunity for experiential learning allows participants to see that they can live on their own, if this is a desired goal, and it helps the instructor measure the effectiveness of the training while determining if further training is indicated. Participants may experience a variety of jobs so they can explore their interests, identify needed job modifications, and determine future vocational goals. Ideally, work experiences are offered on the AIDB campus and also in the community. Whenever possible, the staff tries to facilitate connections with an employer or job classification that is available in the participant's home community. Completing work experiences in the home community with the hope of one becoming a permanent job is preferable. Participants may learn how to complete a job application, write a resume, or develop proper interview techniques.

The key to the success of Gentry or any rehabilitation program lies in the strength and quality of its partnerships. Smith et al. report that Federal legislation [6], such as the Workforce Investment Act and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act and State policies, mandates interagency agreements and collaboration in planning and service delivery. The authors note that “VR [vocational rehabilitation] area administrators felt that interagency agreements increased the number of placements.” Bishop defined collaboration as “a way of thinking and relating, a philosophy, a paradigm shift, an attitude change [7]. It requires a set of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values. The result is a shared ownership, shared responsibility, and shared success.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force in its 2004 report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs [8] noted the importance of collaboration and integration of services across agencies in order to meet the goal of successful transition and employment of veterans with service-connected disabilities. The report states that the task force supports the concept of partnerships and integration of multiorganization services to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services.

AIDB and ADRS have collaborated for more than 35 years in joint-service programs for children and adults with hearing and vision loss—and particularly in job training and placement for adults with disabilities, with ADRS allocating resources to Gentry’s budget for training programs. This long-standing relationship and the outcomes obtained by participants who have received services through joint agreements with Gentry and ADRS support the theory that by the partnering and pooling of resources, consumers are the beneficiaries of an efficient and seamless delivery system of adult rehabilitation services. One constant that has continued in the history of the Gentry Facility is the fundamental relationship between AIDB, ADRS, and the consumer. This triangular partnership is now expanded to include a fourth group—the community. We define the community to include other agencies and service providers, volunteers, family members, friends, retired employees of the facility,

and current and potential community employers as important partners.

For almost 150 years, AIDB has been building on the foundation of collaboration. Yes, individual lifestyle, education, and rehabilitation need change—but the central concept of community-agency-consumer triangular partnerships is the only roadmap to successful outcomes. Through the years, AIDB’s strong network of collaborative efforts has become as diverse as our array of programs that literally span a person’s lifetime, beginning with early intervention agencies, including the optometry and medical services of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Area Agencies on Aging, and a host of state and local service organizations. More than 20 years ago, a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation enabled AIDB to establish its statewide network of regional centers—not to duplicate existing services, but instead to build on the concept of helping consumers connect with community resources and training options that meet their personal needs and goals.

Helen Keller, an Alabama native and the world-renowned role model and advocate for individuals with disabilities, once said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” We should continue to trumpet this visionary woman’s words and ideas—because we as agencies working together can profoundly and positively impact persons with disabilities by improving employment opportunities.

REFERENCES

1. National Organization on Disabilities [homepage on the Internet]. Washington (DC): c2005. Employment rates of people with disabilities [cited 2004 Jan]. Available from <http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=13>
2. Gajar A. Postsecondary education. In: Rusch FR, Chadsey-Rusch JG, editors. *Beyond high school: Transition from school to work*. Belmont (CA): Wadsworth Publishing; 1998. p. 17–23.
3. Johnson DR, Stodden RA, Emanuel EJ, Luecking R, Mack M. Current challenges facing secondary education transition services: What research tells us. *Exceptional Children*; volume 68. The Council for Exceptional Children: Arlington (VA); 2002. p. 519–31.

4. Blashaski L, Sligar S. Link by link: A guide to the development and implementation of services for persons who are deaf-blind and live in rural areas. Rockford (IL): The Center for Sight and Hearing; 2004. p. 1–24.
5. Mount B, Zwernik K. Making futures happen: A manual for facilities of personal futures planning. St. Paul (MN): Metropolitan Council's Developmental Disabilities Case Management Project; 1990.
6. Smith CA, Metzel DS, Schalock B. Local vocational rehabilitation interagency agreements for employment: Partners, collaborative activities, and impact. Institute for Community Inclusion [publication on Internet]. 2003 May [cited 2005 Jan 19]. Available from: <http://www.communityinclusion.org/publications>
7. Bishop KK. Family/professional collaboration for children with special health needs and their families (monograph). Burlington (VT): Department of Social Work, University of Vermont; 1993. p. 11–12.
8. Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force. Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs: The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for the 21st Century Veteran. Washington (DC): Department of Veterans Affairs; 2004 Mar.