

## Abstract

The Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) has been operating under an Order of Selection (OOS) policy since the late 1980s. The DORS has faced multiple issues related to federal distributions of vocational rehabilitation (VR) funds, state financial support, and increasing cost of services and demands for services. To address these problems, the agency has focused on serving individuals with the most significant disabilities (MSD) and significant disabilities (SD). This has included soliciting additional state funds, restructuring the case-services budget, entering into cooperative agreements with other state agencies, and creating management techniques that support counselors.

## Background

The Maryland DORS has been under an Order of Selection (OOS) policy since the late 1980s. Since the implementation of the OOS policy, the DORS has focused on only serving individuals with MSD and SD, due to lack of resources to serve all eligible individuals. The agency has been under financial pressure over the past decade. Inflation has boosted the cost of providing services by approximately 25%, while federal funding for the state budget has risen less than 10%. The DORS is among the lowest-funded VR agencies in the country. The agency has also felt an increased demand for services, with applications going up 40% over the last decade. These pressures have resulted in the agency having to create a waitlist for services (for individuals in all priority categories) and not providing services to individuals with non-significant disabilities.

In order to continue to provide services to individuals with disabilities, including those with MSD and SD, the DORS had to take an aggressive look at its case-services budget. The agency has also used several management strategies, such as specialty caseloads focusing on particular disability groups, to help staff better serve individuals with MSD and SD.

## Purpose, Goals, and Implementation

The goal of the practices is to maintain the agency priority to

serve those with MSD and SD. The purposes are maximizing case-services funds and designating and managing staff within the context of this priority.

### a) Strategies to maximize financial resources

Strategies that the DORS has used to increase available service funds included monitoring indicators of service capacity, working with the state government to secure re-allotment money from the federal support grant, and using American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding to bolster its case-services budget. The agency has also put effort and resources into submitting cost reimbursement claims to the Social Security Administration (SSA), and has seen a strong return on this investment.

### The refinements include:

- Updates to the output of the electronic case management system, which enables staff to extract information from cases without having to look at the actual case that is located in a local office. This represented a major time savings as staff no longer had to go out to the local office to get this information.
- Increased access to the Unemployment Insurance (UI) database, so that staff can pull wage history reports directly from the database. This information is necessary to prove employment and earnings and determine if a customer worked at the level of Substantial Gainful Activity for the time period (9 months) that is required for reimbursement. The agency also has access to out-of-state wages for customers who are working in neighboring states.
- Access to the Social Security database. This makes it possible for staff to confirm within 24-48 hours whether or not an individual is an SSA beneficiary, and in a status where the agency could be reimbursed.

### b) Human resource management techniques

#### a. Entering into cooperative agreements with other state agencies.

The DORS has developed and implemented a number of disability-specific partner initiatives that have further

focused and aligned agency resources on MSD and SD populations. Partnership initiatives have been developed with the state Mental Hygiene Administration, the Maryland Brain Injury Association, the Deaf community, and the state agency that provides services to individuals with developmental disabilities. The Maryland State Department of Education has facilitated the agency's relationships with public schools throughout the state. These relationships are important when communicating DORS service and potential changes, for example, opening or closing an OOS priority category (i.e., either starting to serve individuals in a priority category who previously could not be served or placing individuals in a priority category on a waitlist for services when the agency was previously able to provide services), or implementing a waitlist for all individuals.

#### ***b. Restructuring counselor performance evaluations.***

The Rehabilitation Services Administration works with each state VR agency to set overall performance goals, and it is common for VR agencies to work with counselors to set their own individual performance goals to help the agency meet the RSA-set indicators. According to a key informant, Maryland has a program called "Management for Results" that is used across agencies to increase efficiency, accountability, and continuous improvement. Staff performance under this model is evaluated with a combination of data-driven and behavioral indicators. The model for staff evaluations is based on the RSA-set indicators, with the additions of customer satisfaction, timeliness of service, adherence to policy and procedure, demonstration of fiscal management of case-load and case-service dollars, and quality of relationship with community referral sources.

#### ***c. Providing staff training and other resources.***

Other efforts to support staff have included training and preparation to ensure that counselors are prepared to work with customers with multiple and complex barriers to employment. The DORS provides training on emerging issues, for example, information on the impact of autism spectrum disorder on success in school and work. The agency has also invested in providing access to benefits to assist counselors in working with SSA beneficiaries who may be concerned about losing their cash or medical benefits if they return to work. The DORS also has dedicated staff and a dedicated office for individuals who are Blind.

## **Results**

When asked how Maryland continually performs well despite long-time resource shortages and need for an OOS policy and waitlists at times, key informants pointed to agency leadership and vision. They also cited the development of initiatives that matched with the agency's values and mission, and the importance of building partnerships with other agencies, schools, and businesses throughout the state. Specific aspects mentioned include maintaining and clearly communicating attainable expectations to staff and members of the community (e.g., provider partners, current and potential customers). Additionally, informants noted that the DORS cooperative relationships with other service providers (e.g., the Mental Hygiene Administration) has been very important in providing services to mutual customers, in a way that supports the work of the DORS counselors and provides additional services to customers that result in better work outcomes.

### **For more information about this practice please contact:**

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