

Comprehensive Response to Insufficient Funds, and How the Agency Went into and Came Out of an Order of Selection

Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Abstract

In Fiscal Year 2001, the Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) did not have adequate funds to serve all eligible customers, and was required to implement an Order of Selection (OOS) policy. DVR used a variety of management practices to implement the OOS policy, including: a) reducing the cost of purchased services, b) counselor training on priority category implementation, c) releasing names from the waitlist and processing cases, d) counselor training on caseload management and service policies, e) revision of the customer referral process, and f) customer workshops on employment readiness. Implemented under new DVR leadership, the practices allowed the agency to reduce the waitlist and end the OOS policy in 2008.

Background

In November 2000, the Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) was required to go into an Order of Selection (OOS) due to inadequate funds to serve all eligible customers. The implementation of the OOS policy took place within the context of several issues: a) the challenge of effectively communicating the new policy to stakeholders, b) a backlog of applicants and changing customer demographics, c) issues with staffing qualifications and shortages, and d) a decreasing rehabilitation rate and increasing costs of purchased services.

In 2005, the new DVR director implemented several management practices, making the elimination of the waitlist a top priority. By committing to these changes, the agency was able to more effectively use its case-service dollars and improve case flow.

Purpose, Goals, and Implementation

DVR employed several practices to reduce the waitlist and get out of the OOS:

a) Reducing the cost of purchased services

The director revised the Community Rehabilitation Provider

contracts and reduced funding by approximately 40%. Contracts were discontinued with vendors and programs that were not contributing to employment outcomes, and the state mental health agency assumed responsibility for the clubhouses. A major change associated with the new contracts was the shift from bundled services for customers to a more individualized approach, where counselors would refer for specific services based on individual customer needs. Providers were paid a flat fee for the service outcome. The money saved from these changes was applied to the case-services budget.

The agency also revised spending policies to help ensure financial security. DVR strengthened the use of comparable benefits and fiscal tracking, and decreased the length of authorization for services from one year to 90 days.

b) Counselor training on priority category implementation

The agency implemented counselor training on assessment, eligibility, and priority category assignment, with management staff conducting case reviews to check for any inconsistencies. Policy staff revised the category definitions, and DVR re-evaluated everyone on the waitlist and reclassified people as needed.

c) Releasing customers from the waitlist and processing cases

Once DVR's case-service budget had increased, the agency started releasing approximately 1,000 customers per month from the waitlist—a high-volume release rate. According to a key informant, initially only about 400–500 customers of those released monthly were interested in services and ready to develop an employment plan. Releasing everyone took approximately one year, with the final names being released in February 2008.

The agency took several steps to support staff in processing the cases of waitlisted individuals, including: sending a newsletter including an inquiry of interest in services and

using the undeliverable returns to update the waitlist, having supervisors contact individuals right before they were released to estimate volume and adjust caseloads, and providing mentoring and support to counselors whose experiences had only been with smaller caseloads.

d) Counselor training on caseload management and service policies

DVR implemented a series of counselor trainings on assessing readiness of customers for employment. This was done to produce leaner caseloads composed of customers who were engaged and ready to progress towards employment. The agency trained counselors on caseload management and employment-plan development using a combination of formal training and individual supervision. Training topics focused on motivational interviewing, strengths-based training, caseload management, eligibility determination, employment-plan development, rehabilitation law, and the service manual.

e) Revision of customer referral process

Prior to implementing the OOS policy, the agency was inundated with referrals from other human services agencies as a reaction to funding shortages. DVR staff updated a self-referral tool to help potential customers and referral sources determine if DVR was the appropriate place to apply for services. This saved staff time and effort, and ensured service dollars were used for customers who were seeking employment.

f) Customer workshops on employment readiness

In 2006–2007, DVR began offering workshops to customers coming off the waitlist to determine readiness to work and employment goals. Counselors were finding that many customers on the waitlist were ambivalent about work or were only interested in non-work-related services. The workshops were designed to address this problem by ensuring that everyone on the waitlist was indeed interested in working. The workshop is based on the “dependable strengths model” and is designed to assist customers in identifying their values, strengths, vocational interests, and how they will overcome barriers to employment.

The model of the workshops has changed over time, according to staff availability and feasibility of customers being able to complete the program. DVR has had to significantly reduce the number of workshops offered because they were so staff-intensive. To continue providing this service, DVR has been developing a contract that will be offered to other organizations to provide the workshop to VR customers, and will be collecting data to more formally evaluate effectiveness.

Results

DVR succeeded in eliminating the waitlist, with the final names released in February 2008. In 2009, the agency moved out of the OOS. According to a key informant, approximately 70% to 80% of customers served over the past eight to nine years have been customers with MSD. In terms of employment outcomes, approximately 70% of individuals closed into competitive employment are those with MSD.

Key informants noted that while the increase in case service money was critical in being able to begin releasing names from the waitlist, there was an overall change in leadership style and agency focus that has changed the way DVR runs. Once the waitlist was eliminated and customers in all priority categories could be served, the agency continued to make progress in meeting Rehabilitation Services Administration performance indicators, serving people with MSD, and engaging in the use of data-driven management tools to monitor performance. It has been these changes in policies, procedures, and priorities that have allowed DVR to maintain agency function without OOS.

For more information about this practice please contact:

Don Kay
Assistant to the Director
Don.Kay@dshs.wa.gov