
Developing a Strong Supportive Network in Puerto Rico

Instrumental Tools in the Success of Supported Employment

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Supported employment began as a federal initiative in 1984 (Will, 1984). Soon after its inception, many states received "system-change" grants to establish supported employment. Change occurred quickly, with supported employment funding growing from \$23 million in 1986 to \$137 million in 1988 and the total number of participants increasing from 9,876 in 1986 with 20 states reporting to 32,342 in fiscal year 1988 with 48 states reporting (Shafer et al., 1991). The systems-change strategies for most states have been documented (Bellamy and Melia, 1991; Mank, Buckley, and Rhodes, 1990), with most states receiving Title III grants and ongoing funding from state developmental disabilities agencies to assist in development of supported employment services.

This documentation of systems-change efforts related to supported employment has been limited to one country—the United States. The purpose

of this article is to document a slightly different approach to the system-wide implementation of supported employment and natural support in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. In the absence of a developed service system or an island-wide source of ongoing funding, the approach used by the Puerto Rico Vocational Rehabilitation Program is unique in that it develops supported employment through strong support networks. We will examine effective strategies that include the use of business-led networks in establishing supported employment, planned growth with a priority of quality of service rather than number of placements, development of a supported employment liaison counselor in vocational rehabilitation, cultural sensitivity and flexibility, and technical assistance approaches that shift from teaching demonstrations to participative demonstrations. The article begins with a general history of Puerto Rico's involvement in rehabilitation and then illustrates implementation of supported employment through a case study.

REHABILITATION IN PUERTO RICO

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean Ocean. It is the smaller of the Greater Antilles and has been a U.S. territory since 1898, when it was acquired from Spain. Presently, Puerto Rico, with its 3.3 million inhab-

itants and a mere 3,500 square miles of territory, is among the most densely populated areas on the planet, with ~914 inhabitants per square mile.

Puerto Rico has traditionally been an agricultural society. This has begun to change with the establishment of Commonwealth status. In 1952, Puerto Rico established its own constitution and the first elected governor, Luis Munoz Marin, launched Puerto Rico's industrial revolution with Operation Bootstrap. Operation Bootstrap transformed Puerto Rico's economy from an agricultural to an industrial base. Today Puerto Rico is a very important industrial center, mainly because of its high concentration of electronic and pharmaceutical plants. Still, Puerto Rico imports ~90% of its food and 96% of its energy. Since 1898 and throughout the industrialization process, Puerto Rico has received technical, financial, and legislative assistance from the U.S. government, which made Operation Bootstrap possible.

Strong ties between the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico are evident in Puerto Rico's governance. Federal legislation applicable to the 50 states is generally also applicable to Puerto Rico. In 1936, the state-federal Vocational Rehabilitation Services program was established in Puerto Rico.

A 1983 U.S. Civil Rights Commission study reported an unemployment rate of 50-75% for the disabled population. In Puerto Rico, unemployment rates for people with severe disabilities are significantly higher, considering its limited resources and traditionally high unemployment figures. The island's overall unemployment rate generally ranges from 15-20% and can grow to 50% or more in some rural areas and small towns. In 1986, the Puerto Rico Developmental Disabilities Council report estimated that ~100,000 individuals with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 34 had the potential to engage in competitive employment if properly managed. However, the lack of private rehabilitation initiatives has made the employment of the qualified citizen with disabilities a very difficult—but not impossible—task.

In addition to these socioeconomic realities, the educational and family backgrounds of most Puerto Rican citizens with disabilities create more obstacles than for their U.S. counterparts. Educa-

tionally, Puerto Rico is in the midst of reforming its public special education. There are only a few private institutions for children with disabilities island wide and their facilities limit the number of students they can accept. Basically, they are not prepared to provide the placement component, which would allow them a complete approach to the transition processes needed by their students. Therefore, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program receives these students with little or no vocational orientation or training when they turn 16 years old. Currently, transition programs are being developed.

Family attitudes have also hampered vocational rehabilitation efforts. Cultural mores such as paternalism or overprotection must be overcome by reeducating parents to be catalysts for rather than impediments to their children's rehabilitation process.

IMPLEMENTING SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

We consider the establishment of a supported employment services delivery system to be a means to overcome our limitations and part with the traditional and conventional and a challenge to seek new ways and means to best serve our severely disabled citizens. At the same time, we are aware of the need to maximize the use of our limited human, technical, fiscal, and physical resources. Following the leadership of vocational rehabilitation program assistant secretary Angel Jimenez and director for employment and training division Armando Ramos, supported employment services have been established in Puerto Rico. Their leadership within the vocational rehabilitation program has been critical to the development of supported employment. Unlike other states developing supported employment, Puerto Rico has no financial resources for ongoing support; therefore, supported employment in Puerto Rico has evolved quite differently. The guidance, flexibility, and faith in the Puerto Rico supported employment state coordinator from state leaders was critical to the establishment of supported employment service on the island.

With a planning grant for the implementation of supported employment services, the senior author, in her capacity as training services and supported employment state coordinator, commissioned a private firm to conduct a needs assessment study to obtain data necessary for planning supported employment services for the severely disabled. The study revealed that 7 of each 10 employers surveyed were willing to participate. The most common forms of assistance reported as needed by the employers were subsidies, payment of health insurance, orientation for personnel and supervisors, transportation services, and technical assistance. The survey also revealed a marked prejudice against people with disabilities: 5 of each 10 employers interviewed declared they would not hire an individual with a history of mental illness, but they would not mind hiring qualified physically disabled people—this in spite of their familiarity with federal and state antidiscrimination statutes. Because people with this disability are a target population for supported employment, this finding was very revealing and important.

We acted on two of the most important recommendations of the study:

1. Development of an orientation and publicity program in coordination with private enterprise
2. Creation of an advisory council for the supported employment program with representatives from the public and private sectors

Following the first recommendation, the First Islandwide Conference on Supported Employment: Responsibility of All was celebrated in October 1988. The conference was cosponsored by Futuros, Inc., a not-for-profit business group discussed below. Approximately 200 people representing many constituencies attended this significant event, including business representatives, parents, advocates, people with disabilities, professionals, and rehabilitation service providers. Through this conference, we started to create community awareness and educate business about the features of and need for a supported employment service delivery system. During this period,

we also received technical assistance from the University of Oregon.

The true measure of success for any supported employment program is the extent of community services developed. To assist us, the vocational rehabilitation program created an Advisory Council for the Employment of the Severely Disabled, composed of representatives from Puerto Rico's Departments of Education, Health, Commerce, Economic Development, and Labor, and from the Developmental Disabilities Council, parents, service providers, the legislature, universities, and consumers.

Creating a local supported employment program involved two distinct tasks. First, real employment opportunities had to be developed and structured, which required a shift from earlier service models. An important partner in helping us in the shift was the Council of Private Enterprise and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Employment of the Citizens with Handicaps, Futuros, Inc. This is a nonprofit corporation begun by 75 concerned Fortune 1,000 corporations with plants and offices in Puerto Rico and by the state vocational rehabilitation program. The purpose of Futuros, Inc., is to promote the competitive employment of vocational rehabilitation program clients. The participation of Futuros, Inc., in vocational rehabilitation program activities has been instrumental in furthering the corporate members' understanding of the supported employment concept and has raised the awareness of vocational rehabilitation program staff concerning the needs and trends of island employers.

After initial activities directed at raising community awareness, we decided to try two systems of providing supported employment services. One was to help build the capacity of the few private organizations to offer supported employment services. The other was to hire new Vocational Rehabilitation staff personnel to provide supported employment services after the appropriate training. For this to occur, we had to create a new position within the civil service system. In 1989–1990 Enid Padilla and Jesus Figueroa became Puerto Rico's first civil service job coaches. This position classification is available to any public agency that

would like to offer supported employment services for their severely disabled employees.

It has been hard work, as total island resources for supported employment include a part-time state coordinator, Enid Padilla, Jesus Figueroa, and the Supported Employment Advisory Council, which markets and develops the concept. Beyond these scant human resources, we faced a unique situation because many regions do not have organizations that could offer supported employment services. To help solve this problem, we established a liaison counselor concept for supported employment endeavors. The liaison counselor would identify the potential of service providers and assist with their development. This led to helping three private organizations offer supported employment services using the individualized, benchwork, and mobile crew models. Next, we decided to penetrate the manufacturing sector, emphasizing the development of the natural support from within the worksite. Our efforts are described below.

THE MAYAGUEZ REGION

Literature from the United States indicated that "natural support" was a relatively new development in supported employment. At times, it still meant that ongoing funding for services be available to reimburse coworkers for their support services. We were not sure whether natural supports would transfer from the continent to the island culture. Even though we lacked the ongoing funding to offer coworkers, we felt that we had valuable interest from business executives who were members of Futuros, inc. They had demonstrated their interest in supported employment by cosponsoring the First Islandwide Conference on Supported Employment and had continued to learn about supported employment after the conference. One of the members of Futuros was Jose Morales, a human resource director for General Electric Caribe Plant in Anasco, located within the Mayaguez region of Puerto Rico. Mr. Morales indicated strong interest in employing a person with disabilities in his company.

We learned that the first step in establishing natural support was developing the flexibility to respond to business interests. With the nearest supported employment resources located approximately 4 hours away from General Electric Caribe Plant, our first task was to build the capacity of the local community to support General Electric. The associate director of the vocational rehabilitation program for the Mayaguez region, Ramon Acevedo, granted the flexibility required for Julio Aponte to become the area's first vocational rehabilitation liaison counselor for supported employment. Mr. Acevedo and Mr. Aponte collaborated with Ms. Hernandez-Arroyo, the supported employment state coordinator, in recruiting and hiring Enid Padilla as the Mayaguez region job coach. These were new roles for the vocational rehabilitation program, and it became clear that Ms. Padilla's effectiveness was dependent on the support she received from Mr. Acevedo and Mr. Aponte.

To accomplish this, a plan of action involving three major activities—job analysis, community analysis, and the delivery of the supported employment services—was drafted. Technical assistance provided by the University of Oregon had a dual objective as it shifted from teaching to an active role. This directed technical assistance toward community action—working with the job coach, the liaison counselor, the regional associate vocational rehabilitation director, parents, supervisors, and coworkers in the development of a job opportunity for the severely disabled participant. This shifted the focus of supported employment training from model characteristics and systems (i.e., job coach, mobile crew, and enclave) to community involvement as everyone learned from experience.

The active approach combined theory with immediate practice through the formation of a team consisting of Dennis Sandow, Enid Padilla, and Jesus Figueroa. Together, they organized and performed job analysis, trained other workers, interviewed prospective employees and their parents, and met with company representatives. To be effective, this active approach to training and job placement had to be both flexible and infor-

mal, thus distinctively different from the typical seminar-type teaching process.

The advantages of an active versus a teaching approach to technical assistance are that mistakes or erroneous procedures can be identified and corrected immediately, there is a feeling of security as one implements new procedures and sees results, communication is more effective in a one-to-one approach, problems are dealt with more confidently and easily, and learning by doing eliminates excessive fear of failure.

JOB ANALYSIS

The job analysis at Caribe General Electric, an electronic equipment manufacturer, was comprehensive and crucial, and it helped to identify not only the job tasks and hiring procedures, but also a network of interested coworkers essential for building the company's natural support of an employee with disabilities. The job analysis was conducted by Enid Padilla, Jesus Figueroa, and Dennis Sandow. Before beginning the job analysis, all agreed that, rather than pursuing a job coach model, they would take their direction from the employees of Caribe General Electric. Jose Morales, the human resource director was key in initiating the job analysis process. He convened a meeting of manufacturing managers to discuss support for employees with disabilities and his expectations of the job analysis process. In this meeting he introduced Enid, Jesus, and Dennis and defined their role as helping the company identify areas in which employees with disabilities might work. After this meeting, the manufacturing managers toured the plant and identified three areas for job analysis: a printed circuit and product assembly area, a wire and cable harness assembly area, and a machine shop area. The following day, Enid, Jesus, and Dennis began working typical shifts in the three areas.

For Caribe General Electric to accommodate Mario, a mentally retarded young man with only sheltered workshop experience, it was necessary to modify the process for recruitment of employees.

Mario received support during the interview process with the temporary agency that typically recruits employees for General Electric.

The success and acceptance of Mario's employment at Caribe General Electric was highly influenced by the way he was introduced in the company. Before Mario entered the company, meetings with supervisors and coworkers allowed them a voice in defining the support they wanted and helped them avoid seeing the job coach process as being imposed on them. It also has allowed the company to maintain the integrity of personnel policies from recruitment to compensation. Unlike average client outcomes related to supported employment, Mario benefited from General Electric's typical compensation. He worked 40 hours per week, earning \$5.00/hour. He also earned one regular leave day per month, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day sick leave per month, a \$200 Christmas bonus after working the first 700 hours, and accident insurance. This is the same compensation General Electric and Kelly Temporary Services offer all new employees.

Kelly Temporary Services selects an Employee of the Month based on outstanding job performance. Adaptability, attitude, loyalty, professionalism, and referrals are all considered during the assessment of the Employee of the Month. In 1990, Kelly nominated Mario as their Employee of the Year. The acceptance and the social support that coworkers gave to Mario, besides his good performance, changed his life and that of his parents. They had not believed that Mario could perform with the success he was having at Caribe General Electric.

But times come when luck runs out.

As frequently happens in difficult economic times, companies must reorganize based on business conditions, thus affecting the stability of some of their workers. This occurred at Caribe General Electric and required that they lay off their most recently hired employees. Mario's lay off was postponed until it became administratively unavoidable. What would have represented failure turned into a reassurance in our faith in what we really intended to develop: a strong community network that backs up our efforts. Caribe General Electric's experience employing Mario had been presented

at the Futuros, Inc. annual conference. This gave Futuros members the opportunity to meet Mario through slides that were taken at the plant. The network developed within Futuros responded as soon as it was known that Mario had been laid off. Mario was unemployed for just two weeks; quickly, arrangements were completed by Enid and Julio supporting Mario's immediate employment with Allergan, Inc. At Allergan, Inc., Mario maintained the same benefits but earned \$4.40/hour for 40 hours per week. The last information we have is that Mario required few supports from outside the company and the new company was once again very proud of its employee because of his good performance.

LESSONS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Through our limited experience we have learned several things:

1. Supported employment in Puerto Rico (as, we suspect, in any state) will endure as long as there is a powerful network operating. It is important that this network be led by business groups, like Futuros, and that professionals connect local businesses to potential employees with disabilities. This requires that the supported employment professional be extremely flexible and facilitative.

2. Although developing and monitoring a statewide project requires a lot of effort from all participants, it is still preferable that in the search for "quality" we do not look for fast results. It is easy to prioritize outcomes, such as the number of placements, and therefore involve few community resources in developing the new project. If we are truly committed to supported employment representing a higher quality service alternative for our clients, we must proceed carefully and involve as many interested families, businesses, clients, and professionals as possible.

3. Business should have an active role in the development of job opportunities. This is the best way to gain their real commitment. We must share both the responsibility and the credit for supported employment success with our business affiliates.

Futuros has also proven that it is helpful to receive business at a state level. Their consultation is very important in the islandwide establishment of supported employment.

4. The supported employment liaison counselor is a very useful and strategic position for vocational rehabilitation agencies. This position has given us the resources necessary to develop supported employment services without ongoing funding. The supported employment liaison has offered essential support to our job coaches and has created the flexibility necessary for their success.

5. Cultural differences and available community resources should be taken into consideration when applying new regulations. A supported employment policy will be successful only if it is flexible enough to accommodate differences in cultures and communities. While complying with federal standards for supported employment service, supported employment policy can also be a mechanism to overcome existing limitations such as those in Puerto Rico.

6. The experience we have had with the technical assistance provided by the University of Oregon has taught us that it is important that help should be directed toward hands-on working-together relationships rather than the traditional teaching model. It may seem more efficient to institute seminars that reach many rehabilitation counselors in different cultures such as Puerto Rico. However, supported employment techniques and stories based on experiences on the continent cannot be as effective as an active approach that jointly develops local demonstrations. Particularly in the early phases of developing a new service such as supported employment, it is important to start with the unique needs and characteristics of the culture before deciding to adopt what has been useful elsewhere.

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