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# Quality Assurance in Supported Employment

## New Approaches to Improvement

*The rapid expansion of supported employment has generated calls for adopting standards to ensure quality services. This article discusses state actions that might be taken to promote the quality of supported employment services. The difficulty that states have in investing and assuring high quality is also discussed. It is proposed that quality assurance systems for supported employment include such features as incentives for performance; data systems that are timely and result in feedback and assistance to providers; investment in local ownership; and a decrease in the amount of costly behaviors that are required to meet standards, but do not influence quality improvements.*

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Local implementation of supported employment has grown rapidly over the past six years. This has happened in part as a result of federal and state initiatives that have provided incentives, funding, and assistance for developing supported employment. Because supported employment has been defined in terms of outcomes rather than program characteristics or process, variations in how outcomes are produced have been allowed in communities.<sup>1-3</sup> In fact, many state systems have actively encouraged process innovations in the interest of improving individual outcomes. As a result, there has been widespread implementation across geographic, economic, and industrial conditions. There has also been wide variation in the nature of the employment situations now called supported employment.<sup>4-5</sup>

Initially, variations in the methods for producing supported employment outcomes included only a small range of examples. Supported employment was typically thought of as one of several "models."<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on models is being replaced by a renewed focus on outcomes. That is, many programs now routinely seek and develop employment opportunities without concern about using a prescribed model. Local communities, including service providers, companies, individuals with disabilities, and advocates, have rapidly and creatively diverged from rigidly installing models. This has resulted in variations that tailor supported employment services to the resources, needs,

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and desires of individuals, local communities, and businesses.<sup>7</sup>

Variations in supported employment have also resulted in concern that there are no standards or too few standards for what is acceptable or unacceptable supported employment. Variations in approaches have also been followed by calls for development and adherence to a specific set of standards.<sup>8-9</sup> As supported employment has become more commonplace, there are expectations that it will comply with government standards. The calls for quality assurance have resulted in part because of sporadic and uneven development within communities and across states.<sup>10</sup> It has become clear that it is possible to meet the federal definition of supported employment and yet fail to produce valued quality employment for people with severe disabilities. In fact, supported employment has been criticized for producing low wages, dead-end jobs, and integration in appearance only, as well as for serving the wrong people.<sup>11,12</sup> It appears that the diversity of supported employment settings and outcomes affirms community and professional commitment to individualization, innovation, and variation, while at the same time causing government to seek to standardize services to ensure some minimum of quality and actually reduce variation. The difficult question this poses is whether or not it is possible to raise the minimum of what is acceptable supported employment without restricting innovation and experimentation by communities and businesses.

Response to this issue depends in part on the ability of states to assume roles that will promote high-quality supported employment. State governments are in a position to provide financial incentives and reduce opportunity costs while also providing support and assistance based on opportunities for improvement. States have the opportunity to extend local control by utilizing their information systems to promote service improvement and increasing flexibility in order to meet the rapidly changing needs of communities. This role can create focus on the multiple "customers" of supported employment including individuals with disabili-

ties as well as employees. Supported employment no longer enjoys a status as a new and novel state initiative.<sup>13-15</sup> It has become a service regulated by federal and state agencies. Quality assurance methods currently used include state contract monitoring, accreditation reviews, and consumer-monitoring systems, as well as best-practice checklists.

State governments face important decisions about quality assurance given the multiple approaches and multiple tools that are emerging. The important issue may be, not which instrument is best for evaluating quality services, but rather how a variety of instruments and approaches can be effectively used to promote quality in supported employment. At issue is how to build ongoing improvements in outcomes as a result of the manner in which we do daily business, rather than expecting progress through occasional application of standardized instruments. This resembles a common notion in business management today—build quality into products and services rather than only inspecting for quality later.

Continuous improvement of quality of service will also require local ownership as new levels of service are defined by consensus of recipients of service and their families, service providers, and service funders. While the local community of implementors and advocates has direct impact on the quality of outcomes, state governments have critical responsibilities for investing in quality improvements over time. The purpose of this article is to describe how states might respond to the issue of quality in supported employment. We will first consider some range of responses that might fit under the label of quality assurance, and then offer for discussion certain features that states might use to affect the quality of employment outcomes for people with severe disabilities.

## APPROACHES TO QUALITY

Approaches to improving service and products encompass a range that includes business innovations, management approaches, quality-improvement systems, and formative

evaluation. In the past decade, business and management literature has redefined quality systems. Contemporary quality systems now incorporate the concepts of continuous improvement<sup>16,17</sup> and local control.<sup>18-20</sup> In human services and supported employment, the label of quality assurance has included such approaches as consumer monitoring, state licensing procedures, statewide data systems, and best-practice checklists. More recently, concepts familiar to quality assurance in business are being applied to social services.<sup>21-22</sup>

Quality and improvement of service have recently received much greater attention by advocates and implementors of community services for people with disabilities. One framework describes levels of quality assurance.<sup>23-24</sup> Such a framework covers a number of approaches to improvement, starting with those closest to the individual. That is, a first level is individual-satisfaction questionnaires. On the other end are statewide data systems. In between are such tools as accreditation standards and best-practice checklists. How the issue of quality assurance is approached and what tools are used depend, in part, on the perceived purposes of a quality assurance system. State governments are responsible for ensuring some level of minimum standards in supported employment while at the same time attempting to respond to the need for ongoing improvement and innovation.

Three approaches to quality improvement are defined in this section: approaches focused on individuals, approaches based on government responsibilities, and approaches focused on community programs.

### **Learning from Recipients of Supported Employment Services: Approaches Focused on Individuals**

Quality of service is best defined by its effect on the people served. Therefore, approaches that center on the individual are of obvious importance. However, features of this fundamental approach are often absent from the systems used in communities and states. Individual- and family-satisfaction questionnaires, individ-

ual planning, and case management are examples in which the quality of service is considered in terms of its impact on the individual receiving the service.

*Individual-satisfaction questionnaires and consumer-monitoring systems* are being used more frequently.<sup>25</sup> Their primary purpose is to ensure that services are responsive to the people who need them. These tools seek to determine how satisfied people are with the service they are receiving. Such methods give direct feedback to the provider and/or to the state funding agent about how satisfactory a service is for recipients. Responsiveness to the people receiving services provides the perfect opportunity for creating improvements at the individual level. Data from individual-satisfaction questionnaires can also be converted into useful information by state governments. A state might find that, when aggregated, the results of individual-satisfaction questionnaires suggest, not program or community, but state policy issues related to supported employment. A state might summarize individual-satisfaction surveys and commit to act on concerns most frequently reported.

*Individual-planning teams* create a focus on planning in the interest of designing and providing appropriate supports for an individual. Typically, a management-by-objectives approach is used for planning, delivering, and accounting for individual services. Recently, personal futures planning has begun to replace more traditional individual habilitation plans as the format of choice for planning with individuals.<sup>26</sup> Individual-planning formats are useful for reviewing satisfaction and improvements as well as framing a more desirable future. Individual-planning teams offer a unique perspective as information about a person at work and home is combined with employment data to understand the impact of a job on quality of life.

Addressing the impact of supported employment services on quality of life need not be confined to individual-planning teams. State governments can gather and summarize information about individual benefits on at least

a limited basis. A state might select a small number of high and low wage earners and then meet with the disabled individuals and their planning team to better understand the effects of supported employment on quality of life.

*Case management* seeks to monitor and coordinate the nature and quality of services received by persons eligible for services. Most often, case management occurs through a third party who is knowledgeable about available services, government systems and eligibility rules, and the individual. While quality is viewed from the perspective of service effects on individuals, case management is usually a system designed and controlled by service professionals. Case management can offer needed information for state decisions despite the constraints of large caseloads. For example, case managers often have information about future service needs. If gathered from the local level and summarized at the state level, future resource planning is more likely to address emerging community needs.

Approaches focused on the individual bring a perspective that is critical to developing and maintaining acceptable quality in supported employment. Such approaches do not by themselves meet the responsibilities of state governments or the process improvement needs of local service programs. However, the knowledge of individual quality of life as it is affected by supported employment generates critical information for use by state governments.

### **Approaches Focused on Government Responsibilities**

Government responsibilities to recipients of service and to society represent a notably different need for addressing quality issues in social services. Governments have the responsibility to ensure health and safety in programs, protect the rights of individuals gathering information for program policy decision, act as the protector of the public fisc,<sup>27</sup> and manage an organizational structure that accomplishes all of the preceding. These functions create a different focus for addressing quality in social services. Licensing, program

review and monitoring, and statewide data-collection systems are among the most common methods employed by government agencies to fulfill these responsibilities. Each fills a needed role in the larger structure of a quality assurance system.

*Licensing by state or federal agencies* is frequently required of providers who deliver services to individuals. A key purpose of licensing is to ensure that the most basic levels of health, safety, and rights are provided. While licensing focuses on required standards, it typically has little to do with the specific outcomes for individuals. Compliance results in continued license to operate. Licensing systems allow government to be accountable at some minimum level of health and safety to the taxpaying public.

*Program reviews and monitoring* is a second approach frequently found in state and federal systems. State program offices and their federal counterparts monitor program features prescribed by regulatory standards. The main purpose of program monitoring is to ensure some level of program and service operations. These standards might be state-specific or a state might adopt a national accreditation system (e.g., Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities). Compliance results in continued funding to provide services. Noncompliance typically results in developing a plan to comply and the possibility of funding loss. Less frequently, noncompliance may result in the waiving of certain regulations for some period of time. This approach is discussed in greater depth in the next section. Program reviews frequently represent an inspector's perspective. That is, the purpose of the review is not only to assure compliance to regulatory standards but also to find problems. These program reviews offer the opportunity to learn from exemplary programs. A program found to be exemplary can be used as a resource to the state as well as to other providers.

*State data systems* are often considered to be part of quality assurance inasmuch as they can provide needed information about progress. Data, if organized and timely, can support

government decisions that influence future quality. Cost data for service providers, for example, may serve as the basis for changing funding mechanisms. Data systems are clearly necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for ongoing improvements at a state level.

Overall, the approaches focused on the responsibilities of governments tend to focus on minimum standards that allow, but do not necessarily actively promote, improvements in the outcomes of supported employment for people with severe disabilities. This is not to diminish the importance of these approaches nor to deny the critical responsibilities of governments to both the recipients and the funders of services.

### **Approaches Focused on Local Programs**

Program standards for delivery of services are a common approach to quality assurance in supported employment as well as other social services. Standards typically define a wide range of processes that should be in place for quality operation. Such systems represent methods of improving individual outcomes by improving the program that provides the service. There is a growing list of instruments in supported employment that fit in this rubric.<sup>28-36</sup> Each of these tools includes process items related to direct-service and/or management procedures. Some include specific outcome measures related to available work, wages, or integration. States can promote quality assurance in supported employment by having a clear understanding of the utility of each of these approaches. In some cases the state may waive required state reviews if a program uses another acceptable review instrument. At issue for ongoing improvement in supported employment is how these tools are used. The next section of this article discusses dichotomies in how such tools can be used.

### **Characteristics of Quality Tools**

**Process versus outcome focus.** Most service programs in supported employment have periodic reviews to evaluate quality. These reviews may be voluntary or they may be re-

quired by the funding agent. They are often used to report program status to state funding agencies, local governments, boards of directors, or advocacy groups. One dichotomy in how these reviews are conducted is a process orientation versus an outcome orientation. A process-oriented focus seeks information about how services are provided. If the prescribed processes defined by professionally accepted standards are in place, then the quality of the service to people with developmental disabilities is expected to be acceptable. A process-oriented review looks for the evidence of procedures within a program. Accounting procedures, personnel policies, job analysis procedures, boards of directors' minutes, and so on are reviewed in terms of their completeness and compliance with set standards.

Conversely, such periodic reviews might focus first on the outcomes of services for people with disabilities. The outcome focus is likely to begin with the mission of the organization and to identify measures for the valued outcomes. Such measures as wages, job satisfaction, and social integration are of clear importance for supported employment. Dissatisfaction with the outcomes leads to identifying which procedures or processes require attention in order to improve outcomes. Reviews focused on process standards tend to assume that process compliance will result in quality. Review of the outcomes first suggests that processes be scrutinized and changed based on their relationship to needed improvements in specific outcomes.

Because of their investment in quality of supported employment services, states may be interested in the function and utility of both process and outcome approaches. Questions relating to the effects of process and outcome tools are important for states to consider. Does compliance with professionally accepted processes result in improved supported employment outcomes? Do process- or outcome-oriented approaches encourage a focus on the customers of supported employment? Does either approach encourage the flexibility required to maintain innovation and quality of

supported employment outcomes? Answering these and other questions increases the state and local governments' participation in promoting improvement. The strengths and weaknesses of existing quality assurance tools can be accommodated by state flexibility and attention to variety in quality systems.

**Internally versus externally driven.** Service quality is reviewed from inside an organization, outside an organization, or both. Externally driven quality systems are usually required by a state, county, or certification agency, and may be conducted by a third party. While the purpose of the external quality assurance system is program improvement, too often the effect is to assure program compliance with minimum standards. Programs may be required to have external reviews to demonstrate compliance with a specified set of standards. This assurance of compliance is often a contingency for funding. Reviews with an external orientation tend to meet the needs of the reviewing agency more than the needs of the program.

Internally driven reviews are usually conducted by those responsible for local implementation and assistance to improve the program or to prepare for an outside audit or external review. Internally driven reviews are usually derived through consensus of those providing service. The scale of such a system can vary. It can be as informal as two staff members who share ideas that might increase an employee's social integration. It can be a formal "quality circle" dealing with the quality of service of the program. It can be a regular process based on repeated use of a specific instrument. The difference here is a program's orientation. When an organization looks internally, it generally is seeking improvement. When the orientation is toward the external agent, the organization is seeking to show compliance. An externally driven review tends to meet the needs of the reviewer. An internally driven review is more likely to meet the needs of the program to make decisions about change. Although there are fundamental differences between the

two, a most effective and efficient system would integrate features of these systems.

**Documenting compliance versus leading to assistance.** How information from a review is used varies widely. Periodic program reviews function as a tie between programs and external agencies. If the program meets or exceeds the minimum standards, the external reviewer will not likely create a context for ongoing support. Limited technical assistance resources are often assigned to programs in jeopardy rather than to competent or exemplary programs.<sup>37</sup>

The uses of the review findings by the external agencies can have significant effects on the quality-review process itself. A process used to demonstrate minimum standard compliance usually has program employees preparing for the review so that they can show documentation that minimum standards are met. A process that leads to assistance has staff interested in finding problems so that assistance can result in improvement.

Even when considering this range of quality mechanisms, the basic question still exists. Can states maintain or improve upon the rapid increase in supported employment associated with the first five years of the initiative as they assume greater responsibility for quality in supported employment? To do so, states will need ideas for improvement to help guide their own internal planning as well as local planning and to provide technical assistance.

To help frame the answer to the question of state responsibility of quality in supported employment, additional concerns need to be addressed. Do the quality mechanisms described previously include the features necessary to promote ongoing improvement of employment outcomes? Given the limits of government resources, what kind of investment is needed to encourage and expect higher quality? Finally, given the nature of government and its capacity, what should a state do to develop and support local quality of service? The following section suggests features that can encourage quality in supported employment for individuals with severe disabilities.

### State-Level Strategies to Improve Quality of Supported Employment

**Build effective state roles in promoting quality.** State government is in a pivotal position between national accepted regulations or standards and local practice. State government can influence each in constructive ways. A quality assurance system supported by states should involve not only what programs do, but also how states interact with these programs to shape improvement. The accomplishments of a quality improvement system should be defined less by its tools than by its functional result in improving supported employment outcomes. Given the range and scope of quality assurance approaches available, it is possible to build upon the current quality assurance system typically employed by states for the purpose of increasing a focus on building constant improvements in quality of services. If states can focus on the accomplishments of quality assurance, then it is easier to identify specific tools or features that contribute to those accomplishments. Following are suggestions of ways in which states might promote and support quality outcomes and ongoing improvements at local and individual levels. These features draw on emerging innovations in quality improvement from business and social services.

**Encourage a focus on the customer.** An important message in contemporary management literature is that organizations must be accountable to their customers.<sup>16</sup> As supported employment has evolved, it has become increasingly clear that service providers must respond to three customers: individuals with disabilities, employers, and funding agents. Moving service providers closer to their customers as well as moving decision makers closer to people with disabilities can promote a common understanding of service-quality issues. Mosgaller discusses the difference between doing what is required and providing a service or product that exceeds the expectations of the customer.<sup>38</sup> This creates emphasis on moving beyond meeting minimums and promotes

attention to the satisfaction of customers as a critical and ongoing part of service delivery.

**Promote flexibility.** Governments have an important responsibility to guarantee a minimum level of service. The opportunity states have is to promote improvement in outcomes in excess of minimum compliance. A flexible approach suggests a focus on improving outcomes and allowing methods, models, or procedures to vary from community to community. This accomplishes two things. First, it encourages a focus on outcomes and benefits to the individual. Second, it allows marketing procedures, support strategies, and other procedures to vary based on community, business, and individual variables. Conversely, requiring strict compliance with a process-oriented checklist and assigning scores based on such an instrument as the sole method of choice could serve to restrict innovation over time and actually suppress quality in outcomes.

**Use information systems to promote improvement.** Conroy and Feinstein point out the importance of using outcome information for making decisions about quality and improvement.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, this requires that information about outcomes, derived from individuals and local programs, be available and used for decision making. Available data must be organized into information usable by programs and states.<sup>40</sup> Too often, data about outcomes and benefits for individuals are neither available nor timely. Or, in other cases, data are collected from local programs, but not summarized and reported. Having information available and using such information for decision making provides the measurement process in Shewhart's cycle of "Plan-Do-Check-Act."<sup>41</sup> Information systems make possible decisions about needed improvements.

**Reduce opportunity costs.** A common point in business literature is that management should not prescribe standards without providing the means to meet them.<sup>16</sup> Paperwork, data collection, and reports required of providers—assumably used to increase accountability, but functionally not used for decisions—result in

unnecessary opportunity costs. That is, time spent producing unused reports cannot be used on other activities. By spending time in completing obligatory paperwork that does not provide needed information for decision making, programs are less able to invest time in improving quality service.

**Promote local control and capacity.** Successful local implementation of supported employment involves a cross section of community members. Service providers, government agencies, businesses, individuals with disabilities, and their families regularly engage in the business of managing supported employment. This form of participatory management is not unlike the team or quality-circle approaches used elsewhere in business management.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that decisions should be made as close to the individual as possible. An obvious benefit is that decisions affecting quality of services can be made routinely rather than occasionally if relying on state-level intervention or participation. The capacity built locally but supported by the state system to improve services for people with disabilities should be expanded as a result of an effective quality assurance system.

**Provide financial incentives.** Supported employment, as all human services, depends on resources that are finite. From the perspectives of individuals with disabilities, providers, and funders, there are simply not enough financial resources to go around. In a fiscal environment controlled by finite resources, it is

important to assure that innovation is supported. Financial incentives can be used to encourage change and improvement. For example, to date, small incentive grants in states nationwide have been used repeatedly to encourage and reward local innovation and improvements in the same way that federal government provided incentives to states to develop supported employment.<sup>42</sup>

## SUMMARY

Supported employment implementation has shifted from an initial development phase to ongoing state responsibility. Clearly, this requires attention to the quality of the employment outcomes for the involved individuals with severe disabilities. Supported employment services will benefit from a critical examination of the systems commonly used to monitor quality. An expanded system that incorporates contemporary quality management information will help adjust the existing government quality assurance efforts for the purpose of building constant improvement into supported employment outcomes.

Innovations in quality assurance approaches in the public and private sectors emphasize the importance of multiple methods at multiple levels. For supported employment this emphasizes the need for quality assurance that includes a focus on individual satisfaction and community outcomes as well as meeting state responsibilities.

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