



Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on VR Program Management  
(RTAC)  
Institute for Community Inclusion  
University of Massachusetts Boston

**Request for Interest in Participating in a Research Project  
on Improving VR Program Management**

**Letter of Intent Due: May 16, 2014**  
**Materials Due: June 11, 2014**

The purpose of the letter is to assist VR agencies to test out an approach to increasing their ability to identify performance or workforce development issues, develop and implement solutions and determine the impact of their efforts. The participating agencies will select an issue of importance to them, which should have a significant impact on their ability to provide effective VR services and achieve increased employment outcomes. The issue selected may be one an agency is already beginning to address, has started to consider, or has tried to address in the past. The RTAC will be guided by the VR Program Management Framework and use a Learning Collaborative process.

**Improving the Knowledge Base on VR Program Management:** The overall goal of the RTAC is to contribute to the knowledge base in specific areas of VR program management. The ICI was awarded the RTAC on October 1, 2009 and has conducted multiple activities including case studies of state VR agencies nominated by key stakeholders as well-managed VR agencies. In February 2012, eight State VR Agencies were selected to participate in the first round of the Learning Collaborative on VR program management practices. In February 2013, an additional ten VR Agencies were selected to participate in the second round. The RTAC will host a third cohort for the Learning Collaborative to further examine the VR Performance Management Framework in practice.

The investigation of the eight state VR agencies in our case studies found that VR leaders focused directly or indirectly on eight key areas they employed to varying degrees to solve specific management challenges arising in their agencies. For example, the VR leaders talked not just about how to do better Quality Assurance (QA), but how to use QA information to affect such decisions as professional development, communication with stakeholders, business operations, and strategic planning. VR leaders displayed an action orientation and demonstrated a style of experimentation. They valued strategies that enabled their agency to be nimble, flexible, and able to adapt to the changes inherent

in operating in a state system. They all actively promoted and maintained good reputations with external partners and spoke of the frontline staff as their most important internal customer. We synthesized these findings and other related literature to form our VR Program Management Framework depicted below and provide more detail about each component.

Several key areas emerged as important from the first Learning Collaborative: communication, knowledge, and decentralized problem solving and decision-making. For example, there is a consistent interest and expansion of the use of data that may be tied to a steady increase in electronic case management systems. However, as state VR agencies invest in these systems questions about how to communicate this information are emerging. Should data be used only as performance management systems? How can data be used to share goals from leadership through to service delivery? In what ways are goals, knowledge, and data shared, communicated, and used in VR agencies? What data items do frontline counselors need in order to make better decisions about services? Another area is workforce and human resources. The workforce is quite variably defined depending upon the structure and nature of purchased services in VR agencies. State VR agencies are making different decisions about what is a vendor service, what is delivered directly, or what is an “in-house” contracted service. How does one mobilize a workforce that is not entirely under agency human resources influence?

## **VR Program Management Framework**

The VR Program Management Framework reflects a number of defining characteristics or core principles that we found common to most program or performance management strategies and that are typically embraced in well-managed agencies. The framework *supports an integrated perspective* to program management. While the draft framework includes nine distinct management areas, these areas are functionally related such that changes in one will influence processes and results in others. Thus, changes contemplated in any one of the nine areas included in the framework should be pursued with attention to each of the other management functions to help avoid unintended consequences and to ensure consistency of purpose in affecting performance in the manner intended.

The framework also promotes *adaptability and flexibility* in recognition that each state VR agency operates in a unique context and faces different internal and external challenges. Thus, the framework does not prescribe specific organizational structures or specific management tools. Rather the framework recognizes that optimal organizational structures or management tools will vary in concert with a number of factors, such as the agency’s size and workforce capacity.

The management framework includes the following nine components. We have included a condensed list of relevant practices for each.

**Communication:**

The agency management

- Presents clear expectations in outcomes, communicated internally and externally through actions as well as words
- Pursues multiple lines of communication and encourages staff at all levels of the organization to communicate through formal and informal channels
- Varies communication methods and frequency to fit the purpose (e.g., informing an audience, seeking input or assistance, building consensus, etc.)
- Ensures that the communication process receives feedback from the targeted audience.

**Customers:**

The agency

- Establishes processes that support effective service delivery and high quality outcomes.
- Ensures that all staff understands these needs and maintains a highly responsive approach in all interactions with agency customers within the framework of agency goals and value.
- Pursues continuous improvement in the dual customer system: people with disabilities and employer.

**Data, Quality Assurance, and Metrics:**

The agency

- Uses performance data to inform decision-making and continuous improvement.
- Allows its QA program to support all aspects of agency operations, including customer services, staff development, financial accountability, vendor performance, and others.
- Continuously reviews service processes and outcomes to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and alignment with agency values.

**Leadership:**

Agency leaders

- Establish an organizational culture that reflects core values (e.g. customer focus, learning, trust, respect, innovation, continuous improvement).
- Review available data to assess progress toward stated goals, identify trends and course correct, and communicate the results of these decisions.
- Are action oriented and results oriented.
- Adopt a flexible approach to management that allows rapid response to changing conditions.
- Understand that leaders emerge from all levels within the organization and support leadership development.

**Mission and Strategic Planning:**

The agency

- Has a clear strategic plan aligned with core values, embedded into agency operations and communicated to all staff and customers.
- Is flexible and adaptable to dynamic internal and external circumstances (e.g., legislative priorities, funding issues, unanticipated problems) while maintaining long-term focus.

The strategic planning process is based on:

- The collection and analysis of relevant data
- The identification of both long and short-term key objectives and goals
- Flexibility to accommodate unanticipated changes as they arise

### **Partnerships:**

The agency:

- Develops effective partnerships with employers, agencies, advocacy groups, and others through mutual cooperation.
- Understands that all partnerships should be characterized by mutual cooperation, shared responsibility and accountability, and a focus on achieving VR outcomes.
- Understands the importance of relationships at the local service delivery area.

### **Processes:**

Agency processes are:

- Designed to achieve employment outcomes in a cost-effective way.
- Supported by an information system that tracks cost, transactions and results.
- Are clearly communicated throughout the agency.

### **Services:**

The agency

- Ensures that the service approach is aligned with core values.
- Continuously reviews its approach to delivering consumer services to maximize outcomes while maintaining the flexibility to respond to individual customer needs as they arise.

### **Workforce and Human Resources:**

The agency

- Recruits and maintains an innovative and competent workforce at all levels that reflects diversity sufficient to meet needs of all consumers.
- Supports creative workforce redesign activities that respond to changing needs and ensure successful recruitment, on boarding, retention, and staff development over time.
- Recognizes that all staff are potential leaders and emphasizes ongoing development in problem-solving, data literacy, and other skills upon which effective leaderships rests.

## **What do we mean by Learning Collaborative?**

The RTAC adopted and adapted a learning collaborative method used in other fields (notably public health) to initiate a cross VR agency strategy for problem solving, identification and application of practice based solutions, and evaluation of related outcomes. This method is a peer-to-peer knowledge exchange model that features strong evaluation components providing documentation of success. Features of the collaborative include face-to-face meetings, on-site and distance consultation, self-assessment, and tailored evaluation. Anticipated benefits include identification of workable solutions,

space to innovate, new colleagues in other VR agencies, use of critical skills, professional development opportunities, and the opportunity to pilot an effort before going to scale.

You will be asked to:

- a) Identify a lead person and a team with designated roles
- b) Participate in face to face meetings (at the expense of the ICI)
- c) Participate in on-site consultation and distance consultation
- d) Complete a pre- and post- self assessment
- e) Identify, launch, and complete an initiative (related to program management as described below) within 12 months (7/01/14 to 6/30/15)
- f) Participate in the design and conduct of evaluation activities
- g) Act as peer consultants to other members of the learning collaborative by suggesting solutions, identifying experts both within the VR agencies and networks, and describing past and current experience in similar efforts.
- h) Participate in telephone interviews approximately 30 to 90 days post learning collaborative on the value of the experience. An external evaluator not part of the RTAC will conduct these.

The RTAC will:

- a) Host, organize and pay for learning collaborative meetings, webinars, phone conferences and similar communication strategies.
- b) Visit each agency at least three times in the year. Within the first month, the RTAC staff will visit to become familiar with specific efforts, discuss your self-assessment, and to consult with you about the plan for the year. Within the last quarter of the project, the RTAC staff will make one site visit to respond to needs, provide consultation on evaluation and sustainability components, and to seek feedback on the learning collaborative experience.
- c) Identify and pay for external consultants and experts on key topics identified by the learning collaborative members.
- d) Provide consultation and coaching on evaluation strategies.

**Identifying a management issue:** The RTAC intends to support up to eight State VR Agencies or Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Programs working on a management or leadership issue that utilizes the eight components in the VR Program Management Framework. Interested parties are encouraged to identify a project that can be completed in 12 months, would benefit from peer-to-peer exchange, and can be evaluated by the achievement of a specific outcome. The following are examples of topics that could be further defined into 12-month projects with an achievable outcome. You are not limited to these examples and are strongly encouraged to discuss the chosen topic with Dr. Susan Foley to determine appropriateness for the effort.

- Strategic use of inputs (i.e. needs assessment, state plan) in planning processes to improve client employment outcomes
- Assessing vendor performance
- Managing the demand for services, case flow, and outreach (i.e. OOS policy, targeted outreach)

- Enhancing service capacity through new or improved partnerships (i.e. employers)
- Improving efficiencies in specific business processes (i.e. procurement, onboarding new staff). Please note, in order avoid competition with other initiatives, we will not consider proposals on ROI
- Workforce development strategies leading to staff retention (i.e. succession planning, staff engagement, personnel role and function redesign)

### **Eligibility for Research Project:**

Only State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Programs are eligible. All State VR Agencies including General, Combined, Blind and Tribal agencies and agencies operating in DC, Puerto Rico and the territories are eligible. We encourage each lead agency to consider including key partners as relevant to the selected management topic including but not limited to:

- Tribal Nation and American Indian programs
- Technical Assistance and Continuing Education (TACE) Centers
- Key personnel from other state agencies
- University partners such as evaluators or rehabilitation counseling faculty
- Statewide Rehabilitation Council members
- Independent Living Centers
- Advocacy groups
- Vendor associations

You should clearly define the role of the partner, any relevant past efforts, and how the partnership will assist in the achievement of the targeted outcome. Include this effort in the sections provided in the narrative.

### **How to Participate:**

- 1. Letter of Intent:** A letter of interest is due by **May 16, 2014 by 11:59pm** EST addressed to Julisa Cully at [julisa.cully@umb.edu](mailto:julisa.cully@umb.edu). The letter should include the following items:
  - i. Name, phone number, and email of contact person for future correspondence.
  - ii. Description of selected topic not to exceed 300 words.
  - iii. Specify the goal or outcome of the activity that will be achieved within 12 months. Not to exceed 50 words.
  - iv. Indicate whether or not you request a consultation call.
- 2. Receipt of Letter of Interest:** You will receive an email confirmation of receipt of letter of interest within 24 hours. If you do not receive the confirmation, please contact Julisa Cully at [julisa.cully@umb.edu](mailto:julisa.cully@umb.edu).
- 3. Materials Needed:** We will review the letters of interest and select those that will meet inclusion criteria. You will receive a response email by May 17th that includes a link to the materials templates. All of the following materials must be submitted electronically by June 11, 2014 by 11:59 pm EST to be considered.
  - i. **Letter of Commitment (LOC) from VR Director:** This LOC should be short (1 -2 pages) on official letterhead with the director's signature and indicate firm commitment for the VR agency to join the Learning

Collaborative for one 12-month period and for support to complete activities as defined in the narrative.

**Materials and Content:**

- ii. **Narrative:** You will be guided through the narrative section by a series of open-ended questions in a web-based form housed by SurveyGizmo.com. These questions will include:
  - 1. Description of the Management Issue and How a Learning Collaborative Strategy May Advance the Effort
  - 2. Intended Activities, Objectives, Outcomes, and Goals
  - 3. Related Past Efforts
  - 4. Relationship to the Eight Factors in the VR Program Management Framework
  - 5. Technical Assistance Needs
  - 6. Evaluation Capacities and Needs
  - 7. Potential Barriers and Challenges
- iii. **Roster Table:** This table will be a listing of personnel who are participating in the project and include their names, titles, contact information, and project role. One individual must be designated as the primary lead. You will be asked to designate at least 2 individuals that will be expected to participate in face-to-face meetings. These individuals should have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the project. Please note that the Agency Director and Field Service Director will be expected to attend in-person TA meetings at the agency.
- iv. **Budget:** The RTAC will support each of the eight state VR or Tribal VR agencies up to \$50,000. Please complete the budget template and short narrative description. Allowable items include personnel and associated costs (i.e., fringe), consultants, travel (other than that paid for by the RTAC), telephone, office supplies, indirect limited to the federally negotiated rate, and other costs with compelling reason for inclusion. Items not allowed include: computers, software, and electronic equipment and national travel not related to the proposed project. The RTAC staff will review budgets and make the final determination of allowable costs. You are encouraged to contact Julisa Cully with questions regarding budget items.

\*Each section will have word limits. We anticipate that the entire narrative section will require approximately 10-12 pages of text.

**Consultation:** You are strongly encouraged to contact the RTAC staff and take advantage of the opportunity to discuss ideas and seek guidance on how to refine materials or inquire about the research project.

**Key Contact People:**

Dr. Susan Foley: [Susan.Foley@umb.edu](mailto:Susan.Foley@umb.edu)

Robert Burns: [robert.burns@umb.edu](mailto:robert.burns@umb.edu)

Julisa Cully: [Julisa.cully@umb.edu](mailto:Julisa.cully@umb.edu)