**Kim Peck**

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You know, my responsibilities as a director of Minnesota’s public VR program is essentially to – the way we talk about it in the VR leadership team is to be looking beyond the hood ornament, to be looking down the road to identify the issues and needs that are important for us to focus on so that we will be relevant and value-added three years from now, five years from now. And that’s what’s so important about this SGA project, is that VR cannot be complacent. We have to be thinking about, what do we need to do differently and how do we do it differently in order to achieve the outcomes that our customers deserve.

We have a network of 350 staff located throughout the state of Minnesota whose charge is to work directly and provide intensive wraparound services to individuals with significant disabilities so they can secure jobs in the community. Jobs that provide a family-sustaining wage, jobs that are more of a career than a job-job. And our goal is that those services will assist individuals and Minnesotans with disabilities in being fully integrated into their communities.

We have long-standing connections with ICI out of Boston, and I think because we have, particularly in the past several years, have done pretty well in terms of our revenue that’s generated by getting Social Security beneficiaries back to work, I think somehow we got the attention of the research team, and they came knocking on our door to say, ‘Is this something that you would be interested in?’ And frankly, we jumped at the chance, because we have, over the past five to six years, have been integrating an appreciation or understanding of motivational interviewing. You know, what are some skills, some tools, some strategies that we need to make sure that our staff have that more effectively engage our customers and keep them engaged through that process of skill development that leads eventually to competitive employment. So they reached out to us, and we jumped at the opportunity to do it, and what we’re finding now is that, again, as you know, the research is that you’ve got an experimental group and you’ve got a control group, and we are having difficulties kind of holding the control group at bay because they want to embrace and adopt the methodology that’s being used in the experimental groups and those teams. And it’s pretty obvious why, because it’s about rapid engagement, it’s about providing information – the individuals the information they need on the front end, particularly around benefits and the impact of work on their benefits. And it’s also kind of a wrap-around focus where you’ve got everybody that’s going to be working with an individual gets on board right away and is working actively and closely with the individual customer to help them achieve their employment goal. The piece that has gained the greatest support and generated the greatest enthusiasm is embedding the financial specialists on the team. We have historically made resources of financial counseling available for staff, but it’s been more through a referral process. But to have the financial specialist right there on the team that can begin in the very first conversation to think about what’s going to be the impact of work on their benefits, particularly with SSDI beneficiaries, has made a huge difference. I predicted, actually, to my team before we started this, I said I expect that one thing that we will hear from the staff in the field is that once they get the opportunity to work with a financial specialist, they’re going to say, ‘Please don’t take that specialist away. We need that person on an ongoing basis to be able to work effectively with all of the VR consumers, not just those that are SSDI beneficiaries.’

This project is important certainly to Minnesota VR, but I think it’s also important to the national VR program because we have to demonstrate effectiveness, frankly, in assisting individuals with significant barriers to employment to get into the workplace. And we have, for many, many years, used the same tools, the same strategies, the same approaches with modest results. And the reason that I think this is so important is it really provides us with the opportunity to have a laser focus on innovation to try it on for size, and if in fact the research tells us that the things we’re implementing in this project can make a significant difference, that’s exactly the information that every other VR program across the country wants to know and needs to know. So for me, and for Minnesota VR, it’s about making sure that VR will be relevant three years from now, five years from now, ten years from now, because the world is changing, the demands are changing, and we have to change with that. So this is a way for us, using a solid research-based strategy or approach, for us to try some new things on for size, and to really apply, then, those things that we learn into our practices long after the SGA project has been concluded.

I think one of the things with the SGA project was that I was hoping we would be able to get some answers from is really taking a look at the dropout rate in the public VR program. We bring a lot of people in our door, but when you have 40 to 50 percent of those people dropping out before you can get a successful employment outcome, that’s a lot of resources, a lot of people who aren’t taking, who aren’t able to fully benefit from what we have to offer. And so our hope and our goal was that if we can use this project as the way to really study what are the key variables to keeping people engaged, then those resources that we invest in people from the get-go are more likely to pay off in the long run. I’m finding just in the early results that our dropout rate, rather than 40 to 50 percent, those people participating in the SGA project is 8 percent. That is huge, that is absolutely huge, and so if we can replicate that, if we apply the methodology that we’re learning through the SGA project to our service delivery, and we can significantly reduce the dropout rate, our outcomes are going to go through the roof. And that’s very exciting because the people that are dropping out, we’re investing time and money and resources on those people all for naught, and so this is a way for us to maximize the resources that we’re already spending to deliver the outcomes that our customers deserve.

The implementation of this project has been both exciting and taxing. Taxing in the sense of recognizing that we have to be mindful of the research methodology, and so we have to make sure that we have these lines drawn in terms of this is the control group and this is the experimental group, and that’s not the way that our teams are accustomed to functioning. If they’re seeing or hearing about a promising practice in another location, they’re wanting to take it and adopt it. So that’s one of the challenges that we have. I think another challenge that we’ve had with the SGA project really has to do with the timing in that - SGA, we launched after the president signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which implements some significant changes for the public VR program. So even just yesterday we were having a conversation in terms of we’re putting a lot of time and effort and energy into the SGA project, and are the learnings and in that work, is it directly aligned with what we need to be doing in other federal legislation. I think innovation is always critically important, and I don’t think there’s ever a perfect time for innovation, but that’s one of the current challenges we’re having now, is that can we continue to invest and focus on the learnings from SGA, particularly when you look at the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the emphasis and focus on services to transition-age students. Very few of those students are SSDI beneficiaries, so what does that mean, then, in terms of how we balance our need and our knowing in how to more effectively serve this population with the pressure and the expectation that we have from Congress and our federal funder about serving a different population.

I think the changes that we have seen develop as a result of the SGA project certainly is the reduced dropout rate is one of those changes. But I think another critically important change is the recognition of the value of financial counseling, and to make that available at the very get-go. I have no doubt, frankly, that based on what we learn from the SGA project that we will be developing strategies to continue the access, the ready access, to financial counseling within VRS. Now whether that means we will actually have financial counselors embedded in the teams, whether we’ll expand kind of the partnership we have with the Disability Linkage Line, you know, I don’t know exactly what form and shape it will take. But that access to financial counseling is not just going to be, “Well, here’s a referral,” and, you know, give them a call and maybe three weeks or six weeks or two months down the road, you’ll be able to meet with someone and have a benefits analysis. It has to be real-time, it has to be made immediately available for people to overcome the apprehensions and fears that they have about what it would mean for them to work in terms of the impact on their benefits.

I think first and foremost the advice would be hold on tight because change is going to happen a whole lot faster than you might imagine. That certainly has been our experience here within Minnesota, and again it’s because both the staff and the customers have been thrilled - for lack of a better way to describe it - have been thrilled with the degree of engagement and responsiveness, and because of that close partnership that customers are feeling with their team, they are that much more engaged and excited about working with us. So it would certainly be hold on tight, it’s going to move a whole lot faster than what you expect, and I would also say make sure you’re keeping track of the impact on the dropout rate, keeping track on the outcomes, because you’re going to want to move forward in your state with initiatives that will allow you to have the resources to continue this model long term. We’ve been grateful and most appreciative of the investment we’ve had from RSA and ICI to be able to pilot this. We would not have been able to do that without those resources. But we want to continue it after the pilot, and so my priority and my goal would be to use the data from our project to be able to make the case with the Minnesota governor, with the legislature to say, “This is worth the investment.”

The legacy that I hope will come from the SGA project will be a keen understanding and appreciation on the part of every staff person within the VR program of the importance of financial education, that it has to be much more than a referral to another agency but rather they have to be present and at the table in those conversations to understand, to more deeply understand the fears and trepidations that customers have about the impact of work, the impact that working will have on their benefits. So I think that’s one of the legacies, is to build and to put into place a sustainable model that has that ready, immediate access to benefits information. Another legacy piece has to be that rapid engagement. I think one of the reasons that Minnesota was sought out to participate in the SGA project was because we were well underway with our initiatives around motivational interviewing, and we had a lot of IPS projects underway, and so both of those really emphasize and support the importance of that connection and moving strategically, moving strategically with your customers and your conversations and dialogues with them. And so I think that we need to make sure our service delivery model and the process has that rapid engagement as a core element to it. We can no longer take 150 days to develop the individual plan for employment. Who wants to wait five months to have the clear plan in place? And certainly there have been changes under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act around those timeframes, but as you know, in the SGA project the timeframes are even more accelerated, and that’s what people want. They want to see difference, they want to see change, they want to be working sooner rather than later. So I think it’s that integration of the financial specialist, that understanding, that expertise, and that commitment to rapid engagement are the two legacy pieces that will be a priority for me in my position to make sure that we can ensure that those resources and those expectations exist well beyond the conclusion of the SGA project.

I understand the logic and the rationale on the part of Congress to call upon the VR program to be more actively engaged when they’re still in high school. But, as I say many times, the devil’s in the details, and there has to be a recognition, and I think this would come probably from our federal cognizant agencies - there has to be a recognition that the resources are limited, and that if you are directing us to invest more of our resources and services to transition-age youth, that will take away from services that are available to adults. That certainly is our reality in Minnesota. We’ve got three or four service categories closed, and I know that if we invest the full 15 percent as required under federal law to serve those 40,918 students that we will not be able to keep a service category open for adults. And so that’s a conversation that has to happen at the federal level, and that’s a conversation that I fully expect to happen to engage in at the state level in terms of looking for additional resources, because no one is going to question the need, no one is going to question the value. It’s just, are we prepared to pony up the resources to be able to make it happen? And so that’s I think the issue that has to be discussed further is that issue of capacity and resources. We can serve students, we can serve adults. Do we have the resources needed to do both?

I think for Minnesota VR what that looks like is for the VR staff to take the time to understand the challenges and the fears that individuals have, and to provide the supports for them to overcome those fears so they can move forward assertively and achieve their employment goal. In Minnesota, we’ve had a lot of attention on the Americans with Disabilities Act, the stepped up enforcement of the Olmstead Plan, and the phrase that keeps playing over in my head is the phrase that President Bush used at the signing of the Americans with Disabilities, and that’s, “Let the shameful walls of exclusion finally come tumbling down.” If VR, Minnesota VR, can help one person at a time to pull that wall down and allow them to fully participate in the workforce, then we’ve done our job.