

A Systems Approach to Serving Individuals with Significant Disabilities: Customized Employment, Supported Employment, & Integrated Resource Teams

JOHN WALSH: Welcome to A Systems Approach to Serving Individuals with Significant and Most Significant Disabilities. My name is John Walsh, and I'm the project director for the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation at the George Washington University. Today's presentation is in collaboration with the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on Quality Management or the VRTACQM. And our presenters today will be Chip Kenney, Sean O'Brien, and DJ Ralston.

In today's presentation, we will focus on a systems approach to delivery of supported and customized employment, as well as provide an introduction to the integrated resource team model. First, a little bit about the Center for Innovative Training in VR.

The center is funded via a grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration at the US Department of Education with the goal of developing innovative methods to train VR personnel in the work and state VR agencies, and to assist in delivering services to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The center has a number of initiatives, including the VR 101 Training Cohort, which is comprised of 10 state VR agencies, whose staff are engaged in a series of training modules that provide an overview of the rehabilitation process. And those agencies will have access to those training modules until June of 2022.

We also facilitate a number of communities of practice, as well as develop original content, like webinars, and provide training resources that we post on our website. You can access those resources at trainvr.org. And we also invite you to join our online community at trainvr.ning.com. At this point, I'm going to turn it over to our first presenter from the VRTAC on Quality Management, Chip Kenney.

CHIP KENNEY: Thank you, John. Thank you very much for having us here for this presentation. And welcome to everyone in the audience. First, a little bit about the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management, which is also funded by RSA. Our mission is to work with state vocational rehabilitation agencies to enhance service delivery and maximize outcomes through quality management and-- quality program and resource management.

So there's three primary areas of technical assistance. The first one is around resource and fiscal quality management. The second one is around agency program and performance management. And under that is the systems thinking, or the systems approach, that we're going to focus on today. And there's also a general area around quality management of the entire organization, in this case, of the entire state vocational rehabilitation agency.

So what we want to focus on today with you is, one, to provide an overhead of the systems approach and how that systems approach relates to, specifically, customized employment, supported employment, and integrated resource teams. And we also want to give you some tools and resources

that you can take back with you and further investigate these programs and the systems approach that relates to them. So let's talk about what systems thinking is.

It's a design and management approach that VR can utilize to promote cross-agency collaboration to optimize limited resources. And in this day and age, it's really critical that VR be able to do just that-- to optimize the resources, what they have, and identify new sources of services, and align those services and funding. Systems thinking also offers a holistic and very deliberate strategic approach to examine how interrelated public and social and community agencies work in concert to get the outcomes that are germane to their populations. It also helps foster an understanding of each agency's role in an employment outcome, and that will be a recurring theme, especially when we get the integrated resource teams-- how multiple agencies can and should influence employment outcomes. And it creates a roadmap for leaderships within agencies to help manage the change and support cross-agency service alignment and braiding of funding.

Systems thinking and design is an approach that can help agencies really take a really wide, comprehensive, collaborative approach to forging a cross-agency vision for what an employment system works, and how it looks like in the states, and helps people with disabilities, especially those with significant and most significant disabilities, obtain employment, and help those agencies meet their requirements under WIOA, and move toward the visions under Employment First initiatives in those states. It also gives vocational rehabilitation agencies and their partners a real structured approach on examining how employment services and supports can align more effectively to improve outcomes across multiple agencies. And then it also provides for a more effective delivery of services through a systemic approach and sequencing those services across partners, and that will be an ongoing theme around alignment and systems.

So this graphic on the screen shows vocational rehabilitation at the center. It's basically a series of Venn diagrams. And vocational rehabilitation is touched by and also touches several key agency partners, including IDD agencies, Medicaid waiver, education workforce, and mental health, along with a whole host of community programs and resources that could also be part of this graphic here. And systems approach also supports customized employment, supported employment, and integrated resource teams that we think are required to really fully and successfully and sustainably implement these programs that touch the lives and lead to employment outcomes for people with significant and most significant disabilities. And we'll talk about each of those areas specifically.

So just a brief overview, very high level, most of you watching this and listening to this probably know that customized employment refers to competitive integrated employment for an individual with significant disability that is based on an individualized determination of strengths, needs, and interests of that individual with a significant disability, and is designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with significant disabilities and the business needs of the employer, and is carried out through flexible strategies, most notably, discovery and employment planning. And there's certainly plenty of information on that that's available to you. We'll talk about those resources and tools later in this presentation.

So CE also involves working with an employer to design and create employment, including developing a job description based on the employer needs or on previously unidentified or unmet employer needs, and may include job creation through economic development strategies, such as resource ownership or self-employment. So you can see the flexibility and broadness of this approach. It's also involved in developing a set of job duties, work schedule specifics of supervision, including performance evaluation and review, and determining a job location for that individual employee. And a representative by a professional chosen by that individual or self-representation of that individual in the customized employment process, and specifically, in working with the employer to facilitate that placement.

So I want to give you a brief history of customized employment as it has been implemented through the years up until maybe the last five years and give you an approach how a scatter gun approach, a non-strategic approach, was used and where it got us. But specifically, customized employment training was developed and occurred in many states, and the training approach was often inconsistent. And there was no real clear definition of customized employment, so that affected various training approaches as well.

Agencies serving individuals with developmental disabilities were often the lead. Vocational rehabilitation maybe was marginally at the table, if at the table at all. There was little technical assistance for planning and implementation of customized employment after the training.

There was little, if any, formal evaluation of customized employment services. Minimal, if any, plans for sustainability of customized employment in those states. And clearly, customized employment wasn't demonstrated as an evidence-based practice. So the overall result was that customized employment was implemented with mixed results and often discontinued in several states. And in most of these states, VR was not involved.

In 2016, with the start of the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center, we focused on working with customized employment in a more systemic approach. That we specifically worked on developing partnerships, developing certification requirements, focusing on pilots initially, really beefing up and systematizing the technical assistance that was offered in a really strategic way, focusing on evaluation leading to fidelity of approaches, and moving toward developing customized employment as an evidence-based practice. And we also focused on what the intended impacts would be and how customized employment could be sustained going forward.

We also worked with several training partners who had broad experience. The role of WINTAC was more on the technical assistance side. The direct training was provided by Griffin-Hammis and Associates, Marc Gold and Associates, TransCen, Incorporated, as well as Virginia Commonwealth University were key training partners in this effort going forward. WINTAC also worked with the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators, or ACRE, to develop a national certification of employment services with an emphasis on customized employment. That's recognized nationally.

So WINTAC put a lot of emphasis on customized employment pilots. And the purpose of the pilot was to move the focus from if a program would work, or proving that it would work, to finding the

conditions necessary to make a program or service work. We also use pilots to help build partnerships and clarify the roles of those partnerships to build what we call infrastructure, which included policies and procedures, memorandums of understanding, fee structures, and customized employment credentialing requirements. And also, we are working to build fidelity data and build customized employment as an evidence-based practice.

So technical assistance from the WINTAC point of view revolved around providing an overview and orientation for VR agencies and partners. This was a critical element. It was a day-long session that got as many partners at the table as could be accommodated with the idea of giving everyone a firm foundation and overview of what customized employment is and isn't. We also spent a considerable amount of time working with agencies and their partners to see if they're ready, and how feasible implementation of customized employment in their state, and working to help get them ready to start implementing customized employment.

We also worked with them on the development of a road map, which provided a project plan for implementing customized employment. Then we worked with them on developing pilot projects, including sites and providers. And then we provided technical assistance in developing a request for proposals for the customized employment training and technical assistance in the infrastructure pieces that we mentioned earlier-- fee structures, MOUs, et cetera-- with partner agencies.

We also emphasize the evaluation piece really heavily, and we're working with states in conducting comprehensive evaluations of the CE training, and working with them in developing evaluation protocols. And that work continues now under the VRTACQM-- focusing on the evaluation of the provider capacity to deliver customized employment services, the evaluation of those customized employment services, and the evaluation of the customized employment outcomes and impacts. WINTAC has developed an evaluation tool based on the essential elements, that Sean will discuss later in this broadcast, for funders to help ensure the delivery of high-quality customized employment services.

So I want to talk about fidelity for a second, because we've mentioned it several times. Fidelity of implementation is the commitment to following policies and procedures when delivering an intervention. So the essential question to be asked is, was a program, in this case customized employment, was it delivered as it was supposed to be, was the curriculum addressed, and how people were trained? Griffin-Hammis and Associates, along with Utah State University, are currently field testing of fidelity scale for the discovery and also the job development process. And the University of South Florida is also developing a similar fidelity tool.

So these are the outcomes that we expect to see with the implementation and delivery of customized employment. We expect to see an increase in the number of individuals, including individuals with the most significant disabilities, receiving customized employment as a service, and an increase in the number of individuals placed in customized jobs. We also expect to see an increase in the number of clients, including individuals with the most significant disabilities, with competitive integrated employment goals, and an increase in statewide capacity and infrastructure to provide customized

employment, which involves systems change, which includes leveraging resources from multiple partners, community resources, and the education community.

These are the impacts that we're starting to see and have seen over the last five years and expect these to continue going forward. VR is partnering with other agencies and braiding funding with those agencies at unprecedented rates. In all of the WINTAC customized employment projects that we were involved in, VR is the lead agency of cross-partnership planning and implementation. Within the states, General and Blind agencies are partnering with each other to develop customized employment programs that serve each of their client populations.

VR agencies also report to us that staff acknowledge that just being involved with customized employment fundamentally changes their view of employability, and who is employed, and who is employable. And this is a really critical change at the individual counselor level that we've noticed. State agencies are aligning policies and procedures, including MOUs, at unprecedented rates, and really meet the requirements under WIOA, but meet it specifically around the service implementation, such as customized employment. And training providers that we mentioned previously are adapting their training practices, moving away from a train-and-leave approach to, how does training be-- how is training sustained over time? And how does our training approach contribute to the sustainability of customized employment?

So when we talk about sustainability, these are the things that we're looking at that we've, through our work, have identified as the keys. That you must have stable partnerships. We've mentioned that several times.

You must have sufficient provider capacity. That there needs to be acceptable fee structures for those providers. That helps ensure that providers maintain capacity over time.

There must be cost-effective on-demand training. That initial training is very expensive. Ongoing training needs to be cost-effective for states and needs to be on-demand, because there's a great deal of turnover in states, and new people need to be trained all the time.

States need to address credentialing policies. In other words, who's qualified to deliver customized employment? ACRE certification plays a big part of that and is really key to that. And then the fidelity evaluations that we mentioned earlier. Plus, other quality assurance tools that are used by multiple funders to ensure that there is high-quality customized employment being delivered.

So when we talk about moving from pilot projects to sustainability, we mentioned the roadmap that offers the infrastructure elements that need to be in place, that the essential elements, that we'll go into in a bit, are on the basis for the training, and the evaluation and quality assurance and credentialing. And we have worked with states on building sustainability plans, which is basically an assessment of their current state of implementation. They set goals and objectives for expansion and creates an action plan to achieve those goals and objectives.

Some of the challenges that we've seen for sustainability for both customized and supported employment-- turnover at epidemic levels with the agencies and providers, the sequencing of services

with disability, with other agencies serving people with disabilities can be challenging, developing fee structures that promote sustainability and incentivize providers is a challenge but is also critical, serving rural areas or other areas with limited provider options, that states need to be flexible, and imaginative, and creative on developing those options, and determining provider capacity for delivering those CE services, not only in the present, but in the future going forward, again, considering turnover. So I am now going to hand this over to Sean O'Brien, who's going to talk about tools that support sustainability for customized employment. Sean?

SEAN O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chip. I appreciate that. And Chip and I have had the pleasure of working not only with each other-- at least I hope Chip feels that way-- but also with a number of national subject matter experts over the last five years or so to try to develop a whole cadre of tools for both customized employment and supported employment that hopefully will stand the test of time and really be out there and available as really useful, impactful tools to help folks develop and particularly sustain both customized employment and support employment. Those tools, for the customized employment side, are listed under WINTAC's customized employment resources website, and I'm going to spend a few minutes just giving you an overview of what those tools are and why you might be interested in checking them out.

Chip talked quite a bit about the systems level roadmap work, which was really a key part of what we provided for technical assistance, and that was really to document and outline a suggested protocol to be used when developing, and implementing, sustaining CE services. And it proved to be very useful, especially at a systems level of describing the path to implement and sustain customized employment. That's one of the tools.

The other one, which really has proven to be a critical foundational piece for the consistent delivery and quality delivery of customized employment is called the Essential Elements of Customized Employment for Universal Application. And that document really outlines the elements from a wide and deep variety of subject matter experts across the country that are really essential to understanding and practicing customized employment. Funders, such as VR agencies, can really use that information to inform solicitations, requests for proposals, those kinds of things, for training providers that are going to be delivering customized employment training, the development of contracts with providers of CE services, and evaluating the effectiveness of CE practices.

A complementary document that goes with the Essential Elements I just described is a document called Customized Employment Delivery Checklist. And it really is by design a companion document to the Essential Elements. It provides a checklist based on that document, the Essential Elements, to help ensure quality control for VR staff paying for CE services.

There's 3 or 4 other documents that are important. Recommendations for CE Practices is a document that outlines practices that subject matter experts recommend for effectively practicing CE. This particular document focuses on the practices related to customized job development, and the document can also inform training and evaluation on customized employment. Another document that we developed more recently by request is entitled, CE Guidance on Making Referrals. It really provides

some specific guidance and framework to assist VR agencies and staff to make good customized employment referrals in terms of looking at potential customers.

We also get requests a lot for, what is customized employment, and kind of the short version? So we developed a 15-minute webinar, a recorded webinar, that does provide an overview of customized employment. And it is absolutely based on the Essential Elements of Customized Employment for Universal Application that we just talked about.

It provides just an introductory view of what the customized employment process looks like and summarizes the differences and similarities, for example, of customized employment and supported employment-- a contrast and comparison kind of deal is part of it. It's not intended to be used as a CE training in itself, because that requires a lot more time, and effort, and a comprehensive coverage of CE material. And that's provided, as Chip said earlier, by some of the national CE training providers that are certified in customized employment delivery. There's also by request a document referred to as The CE Guidance on Mentoring, and it provides a guidance to states regarding critical aspects of the customized employment mentoring process that's really critical and necessary to learn, implement, and practice effective customized employment services.

We also have done late last year, program year-- I think it was done in September. We have the customized employment sustainability video presentations. Colorado and Michigan, along with some of their partners, pulled together just an incredible overview on their customized employment pilots, and specifically, their plans for sustainability to ensure CE services continue to be available and expand in each state. These videos really do provide an excellent firsthand insight from each state agency regarding their customized employment models, and each video is approximately 25 minutes in length.

They're easy to get through. They're engaging. They're interesting and really provides some of the models of what customized employment can look like and evolve to. They were both filmed recently-- September of 2020.

So let's switch gears here for a minute. We also have the responsibility under WINTAC to provide technical assistance for supported employment. And I want to just, as Chip did with customized, provide just a very basic overview of supported employment, and technical assistance, and some of the sustainability tools and documents that we developed to help make sure that supported employment continues at a high quality.

So supported employment is defined as competitive integrated employment, including customized employment or employment in an integrated work setting, in which an individual with the most significant disability is working on a short-term basis towards competitive integrated employment, and that is individualized and customized consistent with the individual's strengths, abilities, interests, and informed choice, including having support with ongoing supportive services for individuals with the most significant disabilities. And note, there's one really significant difference-- there's actually several, but one probably is largest-- between supported employment and customized. Supported employment by regulation and service delivery design is a labor-driven post-employment service, while customized employment is really focusing on pre-employment services, as Chip said earlier, examples such as

discovery. It's really designed at the end to customize the job for the individuals to fully utilize their unique strength, to successfully achieve and sustain competitive integrated employment.

So if you think about sequencing, customized employment is really the intensive front end that helps the customer develop and land successfully into a customized position. Supported employment occurs once the person is on the job, for those individuals that need more intensive ongoing support, job coaching, and so on. So they're separate. They're interrelated, but also separate.

In terms of the supported employment technical assistance that we've done over the last four or five years under the WINTAC grant, the majority of it really focused on the following areas, that were kind of tied in with WIOA implementation. And these are just kind of higher view. There's more specifics, but these were some of the big, larger changes that really stood out.

All outcomes must be in an integrated setting, with the additional exception that individuals with the most significant disabilities can and will achieve competitive wages. Employment must occur in a non--I'm sorry, employment in a non-integrated work setting does not meet the requirement for a supported employment outcome. Employment in sheltered workshops, and enclaves, and group employment settings does not constitute supported employment.

Other changes that I must continue to highlight were the extension and the time frame for the provision of supported employment services from 18 months to 24 months. The requirement that supported employment be in a competitive integrated employment setting. Or if not in competitive employment, an integrated work setting in which the individual is working towards competitive integrated employment on a short-term basis. And there is specific definitions around what a short-term basis constitutes I won't get into for this presentation, but they're out there.

Requiring the availability of supported employment funds and/or VR program funds for providing extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities. Requiring a reservation and disbursement of 50% of the state's allotment under the Supported Employment grant program for the provision of supported employment services, including extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities. Requiring a state to provide not less than 10% non-federal contribution for the 50% of the allotment reserved to serve youth with the most significant disabilities. Reducing the amount of funds that may be spent on administrative costs to 2.5% of the state's Supported Employment program allotment.

Other changes included under the WIOA changes-- states that are authorized to use Supported Employment grant funds to provide CE services and to provide extended services to youth with the most significant disability for a period of time, not to exceed four years or until that youth reaches the age of 25, whichever comes first. Thereby, no longer meeting the definition of the, quote, "youth with the disability." The new definition of competitive integrated employment, especially as it relates to achieving successful supported employment outcomes, was another major change.

So now, it's kind of in the overview to what we were focusing on for technical assistance regarding supported employment. We also saw that while we were assisting with the changes specific to WIOA

that I highlighted above, there was also some very deep and longstanding challenges with supported employment that really went well before WIOA implementation. They're more longstanding challenges, but also required technical assistance.

And I summarized those as training approach was often inconsistent in describing supported employment, a lot of variation in terms of the training. Also, inconsistent definition of high-quality supported employment services. It was not universally defined. There was a lot of interpretation.

Provider capacity issues-- Chip mentioned this-- turnover, lack of training, consistent guidance was a major challenge. Inconsistency in support employment quality standards to measure quality SE services. SE often was inconsistently implemented with very mixed results, was often disconnected with key agency partners, such as Medicaid, in terms of effective braiding and sequencing of SE services. And really another big one was a lack of viable long-range plans to support high-quality supported employment services, like long-term braiding of Medicaid resources.

So I also wanted to mention in terms of the technical assistance. We wanted to-- we did spend quite a bit of time on highlighting the WIOA changes. That really included the analysis of current and changes to supported employment policies and procedure to align with WIOA.

We had lots of discussions with agencies regarding their current status in delivering supported employment, identifying key areas of challenges associated with delivering and sustaining high-quality SE services. We developed and implemented a supported employment community of practice call, monthly, that facilitated state agency exchanges, quality assurances, and overall capacity to deliver SE. And that really included a lot of direct VR agency-to-agency exchanges of information.

And by the way, that supported employment community practice call we'll be continuing. And if you're interested in joining that to have that kind of exchange and learn through those kinds of exchanges on a community practice call, please do contact John. He is really taking the lead for that, and we're assisting. And his contact information will be provided at the end of the presentation.

We also spent a considerable amount of time developing tools for VR agencies to assist in identifying high-quality supported employment service delivery and sustainability. And we did-- I think I mentioned earlier. We didn't do this in a vacuum. We spent a lot of time partnering and collaborating ourselves with subject matter experts across the country. Those included the Youth Technical Assistance Center, Y-TAC, Virginia Commonwealth, Marc Gold and Associates, Griffin-Hammis and Associates, University of Washington and Center for Continuing Education, the Association of Community Rehab Educators, ACRE that Chip mentioned earlier, the National Disability Institute, ODEP's LEAD Center, and the Association of People Supporting Employment First, APSE.

And as I mentioned, a big part of our technical assistance wasn't just to do it one time and the one and done. We really did strategically develop some tools on both the customized employment side and on the supported employment side to implement in the long run so that state agencies really had some go-to resources they could grab onto. In this case, to really help them with both the implementation and long-term sustainability of supported employment.

Those resources are still under the WINTAC's supported employment resources website. All of the tools are there. And I'm going to just highlight, like I did with customized, what those tools are and why you might want to go look at them.

Similar to the Essential Elements document I mentioned for customized, we also developed functionally a similar document for supported employment, called Supported Employment Quality Features. WINTAC, along with a wide variety of stakeholders across the country with extensive SE experience developed the attached-- and it's in the website attached-- Supported Employment Quality Features document to identify and describe high-quality features of supported employment as a guide for the universal application of those features across service delivery and training providers. Similar, again to customized, we also developed a Supported Employment Core Features Checklist. And that was a document that is intended to provide a checklist based on the above Supported Employment Quality Features document to assist VR agencies in evaluating SE services that are being provided by VR staff under contracted service providers. And the audience for that document really is service providers and VR staff that oversee supported employment services.

We also developed-- and this is more at the broader agency systems level. This is a document referral, I guess, or reference, a document called the Essential Questions for SE Design. And it's intended to help VR agency set up the framework to support and effectively high-quality supported employment services. It's a companion document to the two that I just referenced above, and the audience is VR SE program managers and leadership.

We also developed and implemented a SE Critical Policy and Definition Elements document. It's really compiled from multiple resources, such as the WIOA law, regulations, and RSA guidance to provide a very comprehensive view of supported employment. As Chip had talked about, the systems approach, the foundational work, that's needed to really be strategically developed and implemented is critical, I think, for all systems. And one in particular, intensive service delivery systems, like customized and supported employment.

They're really necessary to achieve and sustain high-quality SE services. And this is just a summary of the systems-level considerations I'm talking about. The cross-agency partner and braiding of resources Jim mentioned on customized is also incredibly important in supported employment. And again, aligning that with functional MOUs and MOAs describing the sequencing of services so they can actually be executed is critical.

Leveraging collaborative service delivery initiatives, such as Employment First initiatives, are very, very important to do. Following high-quality accountable SE service delivery models and alignment with high-quality features of the Supported Employment document that I described above. Being in alignment with those as they're described is critical.

Effective partnering with providers to support long-term sustainable delivery. And practicing systemic person-centered service approaches, such as the IRT model that DJ will be describing to you here in a little bit, so that not only leadership is on board, and mid-management is on board, but you actually have the field that the folks that are responsible for delivering the services do that in an integrated

collaborative systemic approach-- also very critical. Speaking of IRT, I'm going to turn this now over to DJ. And she will be able to get into this and describe it a lot more. So take it away, DJ.

DJ RALSTON: Thanks, Sean. So, the integrated resource team. As John mentioned, one of the nice things about the integrated resource team is that it actually becomes a tangible vehicle for systems work that's actually done at an individual consumer or participant level.

So you might be asking, well, how in the heck does that work? So let's talk through that. Let's start by defining what an integrated resource team is.

So an integrated research team is initiated on behalf of an individual consumer or participant who is experiencing multiple challenges to employment in order to address that individual's specific needs. So you notice, we use the phrase here, "multiple challenges to employment." That is going to typically be the case when we are talking about someone who may benefit from supported employment and/or customized employment. Oftentimes, the reason that they are embarking in those types of employment is because traditional demand-side employment isn't something that's necessarily working. And a lot of times, that might be because there are some additional challenges.

So, the IRT really is kind of that perfect vehicle, because it's designed to specifically support people who do have multiple challenges. It brings together a diverse team of service providers, and community and partner agencies, other core partners, who work with the individual customer to strategize on how services can be coordinated to reach and maintain an employment goal. So ultimately, this integrated resource team is really about a single individual and coordinating the resources and supports that they need in order to achieve an employment goal.

If an IRT doesn't have an employment goal, it's not an IRT. So the consumer and the team of service providers who are coming together that are attached to that consumer establish three main components. That includes the consumer identified and consumer-driven employment goal that is mutually agreed upon by all partners and agencies at the table. They discuss lines of communication, and finally, they look at sequence of services.

So the integrated research team is an informal agreement between the consumer and the systems over the programs that are providing services to that consumer. What it does is it allows members to coordinate services at this individual consumer level around that shared employment goal. And this can be done either in a traditional or-- like a traditional face to face or a virtual environment.

But what's really great is that it brings all of these service providers together, and everybody is able to provide the services that their explicit program is able to provide. In other words, no service provider, program, or agency is asked to provide any types of resources or services that would be outside of their authority. Instead, this is their opportunity to discuss what they can provide and figure out how all of these can be braided together to create a comprehensive web of support that the consumer needs in order to reach that employment goal.

This team approach really promotes greater systems collaboration, and cross-agency education, and accountability of all parties involved in the IRT, including the consumer themselves. Let me break that down a little bit. How does this promote greater systems collaboration?

Well, obviously, when we get all of these multiple programs and systems at the table, that's the beginning, right? We're getting everybody around the table. But what's so great is, in the context of the IRT meetings themselves, this informal experiential learning occurs across these different programs, because they're learning from other programs at the table what they provide as it relates to that consumer, which then increases everybody's awareness and understanding about, let's say, what mental health provides, what the developmental disability agency provides, what Medicaid may provide, what VR may provide.

So it really does create this mechanism for this informal learning that helps to build that system's capacity, because then people walk away with additional knowledge. Not only that. It does actually really increase accountability. I like to joke that when I say I'm going to do something, 9 times out of 10, I'm going to do it. But when I say I'm going to do something to 10 people, hmm, all of a sudden, 10 times out of 10 I'm going to do something, right?

So additionally, the really great thing about the integrated resource team is that everyone, every program at the table, may collectively gain credit for that consumer's employment outcome. And we talk about this, because some folks might be like, well, employment's not the goal of our program. Ah, that's probably true. But most public programs have a goal where employment is going to support reaching that goal even if employment isn't the goal itself.

So who might participate in an IRT? Well, just remember, because an IRT is about an individual consumer. The members of the IRT are going to change, because it's going to be based specifically on your specific consumer's needs, what programs they may be eligible for and/or already connected with.

However, some examples of programs or agencies that might participate could include the public workforce system, such as the Title I training programs, the adult basic education programs, or the Wagner Kaiser program, or American Job Centers, could be mental health. You could have your independent living center staff. You could have programs for deaf and hard of hearing, the Commission For the Blind, vocational rehabilitation, TANF, supported employment, housing providers, community work incentive coordinators. Hey, quick flash. If anybody's receiving benefits, that community work incentive coordinator, or work incentive support advocate, or whatever that is, whoever's doing the benefits analysis, they should be at the table, folks.

It could be developmental disability providers, Veterans Administration representatives, also natural supports and volunteers. All completely viable potential folks to be involved in an IRT. So the implementation of the IRT model kind of unfolds in three phases.

The first phase is what we call Active Research Coordination. Active research coordination is actually where the bulk of this work gets done. Really, this is the partnership between the VR counselor and

their consumer around figuring out what resources and supports is the consumer already involved with. And/or what resources and supports might they need that perhaps are not currently being covered by VR? So at that point, the VR professional or provider and the consumer work together to identify as well as approach and negotiate with those systems and programs to talk about this joint team approach.

Once you've secured participation from the additional agencies or partner programs, then you schedule that initial IRT meeting. At the IRT meeting, again, that's where the employment goal that's been identified by the consumer as well as the communication and sequence of services are worked out. So the employment goal is established. Everybody talks about, OK, that sounds great. Everybody's on board with it.

They talk about who's going to be the main point of contact moving forward. This actually ends up saving the agency as well as the consumer a lot of time when there's a single point of contact who agrees to kind of keep folks up to date. And then we talk about sequence of services.

So this is the part where each of these different agencies or programs can explicitly say, hey, you know what? I can provide transportation. Or I can cover the cost of tuition. Or I can cover the cost of a uniform, or some type of work piece equipment, or AT. So the sequence of service is worked out.

And then basically, you end up with a multi-partner agreement. Now, you notice that they don't say plan here. That's actually really intentional, because, A, the IRT's not meant to be formal. It's actually meant to be informal and flexible. And, B, we also recognize that every single one of these partner programs are still going to have their own requirements within their own management information systems.

So the hope is that everybody walks away. There's a multi-partner agreement. Each agency or program goes back, and there's all the information in their management information system, does their own processes, and things move forward.

The last part or phase three of the IRT is kind of like that ongoing implementation, and that's where we look at itinerant meetings as needed. Those are typically linked to milestone completion. So if somebody is going to do some job search, or maybe they got offered their first job, or they've just finished a trial work experience or a community-based assessment, then the team would come together and meet again.

The other time that meetings tend to occur in this third phase is emergent meetings. So if a challenge arises in any way, then the team can be quickly pulled together, and/or sometimes just a couple of programs from the team are able to handle it and then update the rest of the team. And that's kind of how that works.

So what are the goals of the IRT? It enhances cross-agency, cross-system collaboration and communication. It better leverages available resources in a more seamless way. This saves your consumer so much time, so much agency time, not to mention PS.

As providers and professionals, it saves us a lot of time, because you don't have to call six different agencies now to try and figure out what's going on with your consumer. Everyone's at the table, right? Additionally, it can be done in a virtual or traditional service delivery environment.

It helps VR agencies and/or Commissions For the Blind see the benefit of collaboration, which hopefully, in turn, you all are realizing makes everyone's job easier. It promotes informal collaboration and relationship building by bringing together that diverse group of partners from both the public and private sector to work together in assisting that individual in achieving their employment goal. And it allows members to coordinate resources, both financial and non-financial, at a consumer level around a shared employment goal without the need for formal MOAs or MOUs, because your agency isn't being asked to do something, or pay for something, or provide something that it wouldn't already be doing.

At its core, the IRT is consumer driven. The consumer participates and/or leads the IRT as an integral member of the team. Members of the team are based on the consumer's unique needs. It totally aligns with and promotes core vocational rehabilitation values, like self-determination and informed choice.

Through its collaborative and coordinated approach with its shared customers, shared resources, and shared outcomes, it creates a mechanism for shared accountability even in a virtual environment. And consumers and agencies can share resources, and ultimately, are able to address the needs of more consumers. Because when you're not having to pay as much or spend as much in resources on a consumer, that frees up resources, allowing you to allocate those to other consumers. So just another way to think about it. And with that, John, I'll give it back to you.

JOHN WALSH: All right, thank you, DJ. I first want to thank our three presenters today for providing excellent information and resources on really taking a systems approach to service delivery, and providing a focus around finding resources, and how to think about service delivery when it comes to supported and customized employment. And then also, providing an introduction to the integrated resource team model.

Be sure to check back at our website at trainvr.org to download our slide deck from today, and also, the resources that were discussed in this presentation. And also, come back to check for future training offerings as well. I also wanted to extend an invite that Sean had mentioned around our supported employment community of practice. And I welcome you to contact me, if you're interested in joining our community, at JCWalsh@gwu.edu.

And we've also provided on our slide deck as well all of the contact information from our three presenters today. So I want to wish you all a pleasant day. And be well.