

Practices for Recruiting Transition-Age Youth into the Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program

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Purpose of Resource Guide

The purpose of this resource guide is to assist Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program (BEP) staff in recruiting transition-age youth with legal blindness into the program. The guide discusses recruitment strategies for transition-age youth currently used by BEPs across the country. It also provides suggestions for developing recruitment practices for transition-age youth and the benefits that may be derived from implementing such activities. The guide can serve as one resource for BEP staff who want to add transition-age recruitment activities to their program.

The contents of the guide are largely based on interviews conducted with twelve BEP directors who have established transition-age recruitment practices in their states. Of the twelve states, four had a formalized summer program and the remaining eight states participated in other activities aimed at recruiting transition-age youth.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the Randolph-Sheppard BEP has seen a decline in the number of individuals entering the program. This decline is attributed to several issues, including the downsizing of government which limits the need and potential for food service facilities on federal and state properties, the closing of marginal facilities, the shortage of current and potential facilities, and the inability to find qualified candidates to replace blind entrepreneurs who retire. Furthermore, the age distribution of blind entrepreneurs is skewed to the older demographic, with the vast majority in their 50s or older. As these entrepreneurs retire out of the BEP, it has been difficult to find qualified candidates to replace them, and the lack of interest from many transition-age youth in entering the BEP is of concern.

There are several speculations as to why transition-age youth are not entering the R-S program, including a larger number of career opportunities available to young individuals who are blind through the advancement of technology, misperceptions of the program held by some individuals who are blind and some vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors, and younger individuals' lack of interest in the nature of the work involved in running a food service facility. Limited opportunities in the R-S program due to blind entrepreneurs staying in the program to or past retirement age, resulting in a shortage of available facilities if new sites are not actively being pursued, may also be an issue in some areas. Recruitment activities can help alleviate some of these issues and ideally help increase the number of transition-age youth who are interested in entering into the R-S program. It is important for the BEP to engage in proactive recruitment activities to increase the number of transition-age youth entering into the program in order to ensure its continued success in the future.

Recruitment Activities for Transition-Age Youth

Formalized Summer Program

A commonly used recruitment activity is administering a summer BEP work experience program for transition-age youth. This involves a student working with a blind entrepreneur or several blind entrepreneurs in one or multiple BEP facilities during the summer. The typical format for such programs is that transition-age youths are paired with blind entrepreneurs in their geographic area, and they spend the summer working in and learning how to effectively run a Randolph-Sheppard facility. They gain hands-on experience by working side-by-side with blind entrepreneurs throughout the course of a business day. The programs vary in how many entrepreneurs and facilities are included, how long the program lasts, how long youth work each day, whether the experience is paid or voluntary, and the scope of information covered during the program.

Some programs involve transition-age youth working with several different entrepreneurs throughout the course of the program and others have the student work with the same entrepreneur the entire time. There are pros and cons to each approach. Having students work with several entrepreneurs allows them to see different management styles and also allows them the opportunity to work in different facilities and types of facilities. The biggest drawback to working with several entrepreneurs over the course of the program is the inability to get a thorough understanding of how to run a particular business.

These format options should be considered and customized to the type of student participating. For example, if the student is highly interested in the program, then having an in-depth experience with one entrepreneur may be more beneficial so that he or she can begin to learn the detailed knowledge needed to run a business. However, if a student is focused primarily on gaining work experience, it may be more beneficial for him or her to work with multiple individuals and facilities in order to gain the widest range of experiences and be exposed to the full scope of what the program can offer. Geographical location of both the blind entrepreneur and transition-age youth, as well as transportation options, also play a key role in determining the format of a summer program.

The amount of time the students work with the blind entrepreneurs can vary as well. For the most realistic experience, students should work with the blind entrepreneur for the whole day. This will allow them to gain a better understanding of the time and work it takes to successfully run a business. However, if the student's goal is just to gain work experience, it may not be necessary to work the same hours as blind entrepreneurs. Some summer programs have joint purposes; for example, in some programs the students will work with blind entrepreneurs for half of the day and work on other job-ready skills such as computer training the other half of the day.

Compensation for participating in a summer program varies. Some state programs provide the students with minimum wage earnings for their time working in Randolph-Sheppard facilities and other states allow students to participate on a voluntary basis. Most states that provide minimum wage to students have the blind entrepreneurs pay their wages and reimburse the entrepreneurs through the VR agency. If the student is highly skilled and providing services for the blind entrepreneur, then some states have the entrepreneur pay that student's wages through the earnings of the facility. If students work in facilities on a volunteer basis, the VR agency will usually provide vouchers for such expenses as transportation to the facility and meals during the work day.

Program lengths vary, but most programs last between 6 to 12 weeks. The length of time should be based on the interest level of the students. The scope of topics covered during the program should also be based on the interest and skill level of the students. For instance, if a student is participating to gain work experience, then going into depth about accounting practices and inventory forecasting may not be necessary, but if a student is highly interested in pursuing a career in the BEP then these activities are likely to be very beneficial.

Starting a Formalized Summer Program

A formalized summer program has many benefits for both the students and the blind entrepreneurs. For the entrepreneurs, a formal program gives them the opportunity to have additional help in their facilities and allows them to form a mentoring relationship with students, which can be highly rewarding. For the students, it provides valuable work experience to include on their resumes. It can also introduce them to a career they never previously considered and possibly lead them to becoming interested in the program. Even if participating in the program doesn't persuade a student to join the BEP, it may make a lasting impression which could lead them to recommend the program to friends or pursue the program in the future.

If your agency wants to start a summer program, you don't have to wait until every detail is perfect in order to begin. Building a summer program is a learning process, and the program can be adjusted as you determine what works well and what does not. If your state's VR agency has a summer work experience program already in place, you may want to inquire about becoming a part of that program (e.g., serve as a work site for youth participating in the program). Your agency may want to continue to be a part of that program, or you may use it as a stepping stone to create your own independent summer program. There are advantages to each approach: an independent program allows youth the opportunity to gain more extensive experience in the BEP, while working with a joint VR program offers the opportunity to expose youth who may not have an initial interest in the BEP to learn about it.

The longest running transition-age summer program in the BEP is only five years old. Therefore, these programs are still in their infancy, and the optimal structure and operation of these programs has not been determined. If you are considering starting a summer program, don't be intimidated by the process. Ask for assistance from colleagues who have experience in program creation. The best way to get started is to start small, learn through trial and error, and adapt as necessary. If you start a summer program in your state's BEP, even if it's not perfect, you should feel proud that your state BEP is providing work experience for students, mentoring opportunities for entrepreneurs, and positive marketing for the program through word of mouth.

Outcomes from Formalized Summer Programs

Agencies report that, as of this writing, no students have entered into the BEP after participating in a summer program. Although no youth who participated in a summer program have entered into the R-S program yet, the value of having a summer program should not be minimized. All the state directors who have formalized summer programs agree that there is still value in having such a program.

One of the biggest benefits is exposure. Many state directors feel that individuals just out of high school may be too inexperienced to run a business. However, they are optimistic that these individuals may gain experience in other career fields and later realize the benefits the R-S program has to offer and return to the program at a later time. They see this as valuable because these individuals who have gained experience would be better able to handle the demands of running a business. Also, these individuals may tell their friends about the program and generate interest in the program among others.

At the very least, providing a summer program for transition-age youth gives these students the opportunity to gain work experience, which is invaluable when these youth start applying for jobs. Providing an opportunity for blind youth to gain work experience is an intrinsically valuable benefit of such programs.

Presenting at Local Schools

Presentations at local schools can be done by either the BEP director, BEP consultant, blind entrepreneur, or VR counselor. Talks can be given at schools for the blind or rehabilitation or vocational centers that have clients who are transition-age. Some transition VR counselors also talk to visually impaired youth who are attending regular schools about VR and include information about BEP. These talks should emphasize the benefits that the program has to offer as a career option.

Some of these benefits include:

- The opportunity to run their own business and be their own boss
- Upward mobility into larger and more profitable locations

- The diversity of the program and the opportunity to partner with national franchises
- Assistance in setting up a facility, purchasing equipment, and initially stocking items
- Support from BEP consultants in improving and growing their business
- Potential for earnings
- Advancement in technologies used in the BEP, including the use of computer systems for forecasting and business management, as well as emerging trends such as micro markets

If a VR counselor is speaking on behalf of the BEP, make sure that he or she is fully versed in current trends in the program, including new facilities, current facilities that are vacant, average blind entrepreneur earnings, etc. If a VR counselor is not well informed about the program, having him or her speak about it may do more harm than good.

Working with VR Counselors

It is important to work closely with VR counselors as they are the primary people who promote the program and encourage individuals to join the BEP, as well as the required referral source to enter the program. The importance of VR counselors is demonstrated through the fact that all the students who participated in a BEP summer program decided to participate based on interactions with their VR counselors. This is significant when considering recruitment strategies and the importance of working closely with VR. If you are considering implementing a summer youth program for your state's BEP, you are encouraged to establish close relationships with VR counselors who can relay the benefits of the R-S program to their consumers.

Another important component to working with VR counselors is keeping them informed about current activities in the BEP. For example, if your state BEP is working on obtaining a military dining contract or you have several blind entrepreneurs preparing to retire, you should share this information with the VR counselors so they can use it as interest points when talking to transition-age youth and other consumers about the program. Other activities that may be helpful to communicate to VR counselors are upward mobility trainings (i.e., mandated training for blind entrepreneurs to enhance business skills with the goal of increasing advancement opportunities within the BEP), new franchising partnerships, and new technologies the program is incorporating, such as micro markets and advanced vending technologies.

It is also suggested that you learn about activities your VR agency has for transition-age youth. For example, the VR agency may conduct activities for transition-age youth such as a summer work experience program, summer job skills training program, information sessions at the agency, presentations at local schools and centers, and career days. Ask if blind entrepreneurs and the BEP can be incorporated into these activities. If their

activities are focused on providing information, make sure to regularly provide VR with updated and current information about the BEP.

Other Activities to Recruit Transition-Age Youth

- Encourage blind entrepreneurs to be active in the blind community – the most effective marketing strategy for any organization or business is word of mouth. Encouraging blind entrepreneurs to be active in the blind community will gain exposure for the R-S program to its target population. If transition-age youth hear about the benefits of choosing a career in the BEP from someone who has experienced it firsthand, this could have a significant impact on their interest and desire to pursue the same path.
- Allow students to participate in upward mobility training – inviting transition-age youth and other blind individuals to observe and possibly participate in upward mobility training may give them a better understanding of what is involved in being an entrepreneur and pique their interest in learning more about the program.
- Make the program as visible as possible through marketing and other public relations activities – being visible is an excellent way for the general public to become informed about the program. The benefits of general public knowledge include greater visibility and awareness, generating a wider net to spread positive word of mouth about the program, and potentially increase business for blind entrepreneurs at their facilities. All of these components help enhance the image of the program.

Ideally, each state BEP should strive to take advantage of all of these strategies. The more activities an organization engages in, the greater the number of people exposed to the program. The more people who are aware of the program, the more likely it will be that the information will reach and possibly interest the program's target population.

Other Important Components to Enhance Recruitment

Follow-Up with Participants

Although students who participated in BEP summer programs aren't officially part of the program (yet), exposing these students to the BEP is a valuable endeavor as it may be something they consider in the future. Therefore, it is highly recommended that BEP staff maintain contact with students who have completed the program. Following-up with such students helps to determine what alternative career paths these individuals decided to pursue instead of the R-S program and also provides an opportunity to remind and reinforce with these individuals that the R-S program is still a viable career option if they are not satisfied with the career they chose. If you are considering starting

a summer program in your state BEP, it is recommended that you implement a protocol to follow-up with students to ensure that an ongoing relationship can be established between the BEP and summer program participants.

Actively Pursue New Sites

A common reason for individuals being reluctant to pursue the R-S program as a career is the fact that they are not guaranteed a facility upon completing a long training process. The gamble of committing to the lengthy training without the guarantee of a facility upon completion is more of a risk than some individuals are willing to take. Furthermore, the fact that most blind entrepreneurs stay in the program until retirement or even past retirement age adds to the uncertainty of being able to secure a facility in a timely manner. The combination of a limited amount of sites with low turnover and/or retirement may be discouraging to individuals who are considering the BEP as a career path. If they do not see many opportunities within the program they are going to be less likely to pursue it. Therefore, the importance of seeking new sites in order to demonstrate adequate opportunities for new blind entrepreneurs cannot be understated.

Run the Program like a Business

Out of the twelve state BEPs with recruitment practices for transition-age youth, only one of them had a substantial amount of transition-age blind entrepreneurs in their program. This state BEP did not have a formalized summer program and did not have a problem with recruitment of BEP candidates of any age. The program attributed this to running the R-S program like any other large business/corporation, including having standards for performance and holding blind entrepreneurs accountable to these standards. High standards raise expectations for entrepreneur performance which, in turn, creates an environment for success. Having an R-S program filled with successful businesses draws external attention, especially among the blind community. This attention may then increase individuals' perceptions of the R-S program as a desirable career path among all age groups, including transition-age individuals.

Based on this finding, it may be that running your state BEP like any large business/corporation is the best method to recruit blind individuals, including transition-age youth, into the R-S program. Achieving this within a state R-S program is an endeavor that takes time, discipline, and learning through trial and error. Seeking assistance from other state BEPs who are currently structured in this manner is encouraged.