

Best Practices in the Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program

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Key Points

1. Marketing the Randolph-Sheppard BEP is an important endeavor.
2. Success of persons who are blind and have hearing loss in the Randolph-Sheppard program is supported by data.
3. Transition age students are an untapped resource for revitalizing the aging workforce in the Randolph-Sheppard program.
4. Providing online training for new BEP staff members at no cost will be a valuable resource to professionals in the field.

Research Summary

An online survey was sent to all state Business Enterprise Program (BEP) directors inquiring about aspects of their program including training, recruiting, and entry-level requirements for entrepreneurs in the program. Forty-four state BEP directors completed the survey. The data collected from this survey has and is being used as the basis to guide the rest of the research project. Thus far, it has helped in identifying states that have experience in working with blind entrepreneurs with a hearing loss, training area needs for new BEP staff members, and states that have formal programs for transition-aged individuals to BEP.

A general informational brochure entitled “The Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program: An Entrepreneurial Program for People who are Legally Blind,” was designed, as part of this project, to inform state legislators, government officials, and the general public about the history and current trends in the R-S Program. It includes program performance figures, testimonials from current blind entrepreneurs, future directions for the program, and how to get started in the program, among other topics. The brochure was disseminated to all the state directors of blindness agencies and shared with all BEP directors. Since first being published, the brochure has been used by several state BE programs in developing their own state specific BEP brochures.

Clicker Question: Are you familiar with the National Randolph-Sheppard BEP brochure?

Yes, I’ve used it to inform about the program (21%)

I’ve seen it (18%)

I’ve heard about it (13%)

No, but I’m interested in knowing about it (42%)

No (6%)

The brochure is free to download from the NRTC’s website. Thus far, three states have used the brochure to design their own state-specific Randolph-Sheppard marketing brochure. An additional ten states have downloaded or requested additional print copies of the brochure to use as a marketing tool.

A resource guide for working with blind entrepreneurs with hearing loss is in its final stage of revision and will be available on the NRTC's website in the near future. The resource guide was developed from data collected from 43 BEP directors, training staff, BEP counselors, and blind entrepreneurs with hearing loss. The resource guide focuses on accommodating and working with blind entrepreneurs in training, on-the-job, and at state and national meetings. It also describes the experiences of both BEP staff and blind entrepreneurs with hearing loss in the program and has a list of resources to aid in accommodations. The goal of this resource guide is to assist BEP staff who may be working with a blind entrepreneur with hearing loss for the first time.

Clicker Question: Do you know how an individual with a hearing and vision loss can be a successful Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneur?

Yes, I've referred an individual (37%)

Yes, but haven't referred an individual (27%)

No, but I'm interested in knowing more (30%)

No (7%).

The next component of the project will be focusing on developing a guide of formal recruitment strategies and/or programs state BE programs have for transition-aged youth. From the original survey of BEP directors, 17 states have been identified as having some type of formal recruitment for this demographic. Each of the 17 states will be contacted and asked to elaborate on their specific practices. The data gathered will then be compiled into a resource guide that will be distributed to all state BE programs. The goal of the guide is to encourage BE programs with no formal recruitment of transition-aged individuals to adapt some formal recruitment and to use the developed guide as a reference point to start such a program.

Clicker Question: If there was a Randolph-Sheppard BEP marketing brochure available that was targeted toward transition-aged individuals, would this be a valuable tool that you would use?

I would use this (84%)

I would not use this (4%)

I'm not sure (12%)

The last component of the project is to compile minimum entry-level standards an individual must meet in order to qualify for the Randolph-Sheppard BEP. Each state has a different set of minimum qualifications and having this compiled in one place may act as a resource for BE programs when considering the current status of its program. A list of preferred qualifications will also be compiled for the same purpose. Average facility performance standards (e.g. gross profits, net sales, operating costs, etc.) will also be developed in order to provide both BEP staff and blind entrepreneurs supplemental information when determining whether a potential or current facility is a viable location.

Another output of this project is a fourteen module, self-paced, online course that will be available through the NRTC website. It will orient new BEP staff to the Randolph-Sheppard program. This course is being developed as a collaborative effort between the NRTC and Mr. Terry Smith, BEP expert consultant. The 14 modules are: Orientation to blindness; Vocational rehabilitation and how it intersects with Randolph-Sheppard; The Randolph-Sheppard Act and its implementing regulations; Active participation – what it is and what it isn't; Assistive technology and its potential for blind entrepreneurs; The role of the business consultant; Business principles of managing a food service facility; Human resource management for the Randolph-Sheppard blind entrepreneur; Marketing and customer service relations; Marketing the Randolph-Sheppard Program to outside parties; Teaming and branding – a way to increase income for blind entrepreneurs; Food safety and sanitation; Changing trends: Meeting the challenges of providing healthy food options; and maximizing opportunities for blind entrepreneurs with a hearing loss. Each module can be taken individually, or the entire series with completion certificates for each.

Clicker Question: Should there be a module on SSDI and the special rules that apply to blind entrepreneurs?

This is necessary (91%)

This is not necessary (6%)

I'm not sure (3%)

Panel Discussion

Panelists:

Ray Hopkins, Virginia DBVI

Daniel Frye, New Jersey CBVI

Joe Ashley, Virginia DARS

Catriona Macdonald, Linchpin Strategies, LLC

Would having a compiled list of each state/territory's minimum qualifications for blind entrepreneurs to qualify for entry into the R-S BEP be of value? Would having a list of preferred qualifications for an R-S blind entrepreneur to possess in order to enter the program be of value?

Certainly I think that there would be value in having both lists, a minimum set of qualifications and a preferred set of qualifications. At the Federal level, Randolph-Sheppard has very basic qualifications as outlined in the Randolph-Sheppard Act, that you be legally blind, that you be a citizen. Having served at the National level at RSA as the Program Manager, I know that States have added additional qualifications, and I think it would be variable as people shop around in terms of where they want to work geographically and otherwise. A preferred list I think would also be quite helpful. As this program evolves in terms of those who enter it, it's really the push of most in the industry to strengthen and enhance the vibrancy of the program. It needs to become a program, if it is to flourish; that is not simply thought of as a last resort but instead is a program that attracts entrepreneurs with real business acumen. So having a list of preferred

qualifications and a really beefed-up list of preferred qualifications so that you attract candidates who are good as entrepreneurs.

Let me add, as one who also worked at the program level, we always received questions about qualifications and about the ability of vendors to move from state to state. The third piece of those qualifications is that individuals be determined qualified by the state Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, and that creates great variance in the program right now. So to be able to have a list of minimum qualifications and for qualifications that SLAs can consider and perhaps incorporate into their practice would add to consistency and might allow for greater movement of licensed-blind business owners from state to state.

I think that the type of description of qualifications is huge to have, and I would take it a step further. Information is vocational choice. I'm hoping someone somewhere has identified the critical skills and tasks needed to be successful. And not only the qualifications but what does it take to be successful in this particular endeavor and then turning that into a way to get people to quote those standards and say, "This is a good career choice." I would then further take that for your youth and look at a way to find out how to match up what those good qualifications are - the things that make a difference. If you've got a young person you can then show some sort of career assessment tool to and say, "Here is what this is like to be this person." A descriptive video, "This is usually what a day is like." Here's the things that-- you like to do math. You like to do these things. The school might have an entrepreneurship type course or some internship or shadowing opportunity that might be arranged. I am sure there's ways that you can cross walk this, and somebody's probably done this somewhere, but that would be a way to look at the youth and make it a real opportunity to get people to think about it.

As someone who does advocacy, I think I have a complementary but slightly different perspective. I also think that a list of qualifications is really useful in helping other people understand the program, and the words "entrepreneur" and "small business" are very powerful, not just on Capitol Hill, where there are lots of people lining up to be pro-small business and pro-entrepreneur, but I think in society more broadly, certainly millennials are much more interested in working for themselves than they are working for somebody else. We're hearing about folks coming back from overseas, veterans, who are having difficulty in some cases, settling into a formal work place, and self-employment is sometimes a better choice for them. But I think that for people who are sighted and are not familiar either with small business or with blind entrepreneurs, it's very hard for them to understand how somebody who is blind could really be in charge of running their own business. Having said that, I don't think you need a detailed list of qualifications for your PR and marketing efforts the way that we're talking about here. It's a matter of thinking about the kinds of questions various audiences might have and being prepared to answer them. I think we already have a lot of what we need. And we just need to start using it in a better and more effective way.

Would having average profit and operation figures based on type of facility and location type aid in making decisions about the viability of current and potential locations?

I certainly think that access to that information would be one factor that one would want to consider. I would say that the information would need to be accurate. The RSA-15 data that is collected is based on what we observe and what States observe but sometimes does not reflect what happened. So while I think it would be a useful starting point, I think it's going to be incumbent upon the blind manager or entrepreneur to go in and evaluate his or her potential location in concert with his or her business consultant and make a more informed decision.

I would just say that I'm unsure. If you're relying on RSA-15 data, I just don't believe it's consistent enough and that everybody applies the same rigor in providing the data. I almost think that it's more useful to rely on data generated within the state, then make comparisons across the nation.

I think that accurate data and information on potential earnings is huge when you're trying to do career counseling. Without that, how would people know what types of decisions to make or what their best decisions would be? If you don't have accurate data, if you think state data is better, then I would think it would be dependent on people to gather the state data and put it into some parameters around that, and I also noticed they talked about bi-facility. I'm assuming there's other things around. How much work is in each of these facilities that you can then better describe the opportunities to people? I agree that millennials are into working for themselves, and finding ways to get into careers. We've got to have the information to do that.

I think data is really powerful for good or for ill, and I would not suggest not having the data, but we need to be careful about how it's used. If we have a set of data that shows these types of opportunities bring in \$20,000, \$25,000, or \$30,000 a year for a vendor, nobody's going to be all that interested in picking those off. You have different categories of opportunities, some are earning people \$80,000 or a \$100,000 a year, and it's an invitation to other people to say, "Why should those blind entrepreneurs who are being helplessly aided by the state have those opportunities? I would like to move in and do that myself." It's not a reason to not have the data. It is a reason to be careful in how it is used, and it may create some additional work for us in defending the Randolph Sheppard priority.