

SWTCIE Practice Brief

Gina Freeman and Amy Howell

Staffing Models to Support Service Delivery



About the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE)



National Evaluation. In September 2022, the Rehabilitation Services Administration awarded five-year grants for Disability Innovation Fund demonstration projects. As part of the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment program, these federal fiscal year 2022 grants provided funding to 14 state vocational rehabilitation agencies to implement Innovative Model Demonstration projects. These projects aim to decrease subminimum wage employment and increase competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities who are currently employed in or contemplating subminimum wage employment. To achieve these goals, the projects will create innovative models for dissemination and replication that (1) identify strategies to address barriers to accessing competitive integrated employment, (2) provide integrated services that support competitive employment, (3) support participants’ integration into the community through competitive employment, (4) identify and coordinate wraparound services for participants who obtain competitive employment, (5) develop and disseminate evidence-based practices, and (6) provide readily accessible and transformative business models that entities with section 14(c) certificates can adopt.

Introduction

This practice brief explores the staffing model designs of select Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) projects. It summarizes results from interviews with staff from four projects (California, Georgia, Illinois, and Virginia) held in October 2023. The lessons learned regarding selecting and maintaining project staff to accomplish project goals could assist vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and other organizations in designing staffing models to promote competitive integrated employment (CIE). These findings describe early staffing models, and they are not representative of all SWTCIE projects or VR agencies.

Exhibit 1. Promising practices of SWTCIE projects related to staffing models

Promising practice	Examples
 <p>Align staffing with project goals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze staffing needs to meet the project goals. Determine which project-specific activities need to be outsourced through a third-party vendor. Identify the number of contractual providers required to share in-depth knowledge and expertise for short-term project specific goals.
 <p>Remain flexible</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address hiring challenges and attrition through flexible qualifications and innovative job roles. Remain open to feedback from training and technical assistance partners on appropriate staffing methods to deliver services effectively.

Promising practice	Examples
 <p data-bbox="228 342 378 369">Tailor training</p>	<ul data-bbox="427 243 1414 432" style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor module-specific ACRE training for customized employment strategies and techniques to supplement staff knowledge on service delivery. • Offer equal opportunity for participants, project staff, project administration, and the community at large with the self-paced Everyone Can Work curriculum. • Assist existing benefits counseling providers by training other project staff to address loss of benefit concerns.
 <p data-bbox="199 552 407 642">Consider sustainable staffing solutions</p>	<ul data-bbox="427 453 1414 674" style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed sustainability by leveraging the experience and training of VR counselors and allowing them an opportunity to become ambassadors and subject-matter experts in SWTCIE services. • Use existing full-time VR employees and partners, such as including 14(c) certificate holder staff in the project as service providers, to ensure continuity beyond the grant period. • Onboard new staff collectively to facilitate thoughtful dialogue and foster cohesion and uniformity in service delivery across pilot sites.

Findings

The SWTCIE projects from California, Georgia, Illinois, and Virginia involve staffing models of teams with diverse competencies, skill sets, and strengths to complement VR staff. The table of promising practices of SWTCIE projects related to staffing models (Exhibit 1) summarizes some of the staffing methods the projects will use to strategically source and recruit qualified talent to deploy SWTCIE services. The staffing best practices that California, Georgia, Illinois, and Virginia shared include aligning staffing with project goals, remaining flexible and considering adjustments throughout the project, customizing training to meet service delivery needs, and embedding sustainability to ensure services continue when the project ends.

Common staffing interventions proposed by SWTCIE projects to deliver services include person-centered planning and the use of staffing models that are tailored to achieve project specific goals. These approaches focus on reallocating and hiring staff that have the necessary qualifications to embrace participant-driven service delivery, with the person at the center of planning for their future and selecting the supports to achieve their identified goals. The interviewed projects used a staffing needs analysis to allocate a defined number of existing rehabilitation counselors to support SWTCIE services. While Georgia planned to use existing staff for all project services, California and Illinois identified a need to supplement their current workforce with the use of third-party vendors with specialized skills required to achieve short-term project goals. Virginia will deploy internal staff including VR counselors as well as external partners to deliver services. Each project offers holistic, wraparound services within their staffing model to appoint existing staff to roles that leverage their skill sets and provide training to new and existing staff to braid services between partner agencies for the benefit of SWTCIE participants.

Below are summaries of the four projects discussed in this brief.

Spotlight on California



There is an urgent backdrop in California because the state is facing a mandated phaseout of subminimum wage employment by January 1, 2025. The California SWTCIE project’s staffing model will build on the California Department of Rehabilitation’s collaboration with College-to-Career programs at two community colleges in Southern California. Two VR counselors work closely with the participants for recruitment and intake and with a project coordinator for service offerings. The colleges provide monthly reports to the counselors about participants’ service use, and the project convenes a monthly core partner meeting to discuss service delivery, troubleshoot issues, and strategize solutions. The project plans to train four staff as advanced customized employment specialists. Project partner Griffin-Hammis Associates will offer Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) training on supported employment and strategies for successful employment.

Spotlight on Georgia



Georgia’s Coordinated Resources for Employment, Apprenticeships, and Transition SWTCIE staffing model feeds into their overall goal of a community mindset that Everyone Can Work. Using VR counselors who typically work with the participant population and already have necessary training, the project will develop one pilot site to fine-tune the community-inclusive business model and replicate it statewide. Building on their relationships with the University of Georgia Institute on Human Development and Disability, which will both conduct the evaluation and provide training and technical assistance to staff, the project hopes to educate and listen to the community. The staff at the 14(c) certificate holders in the pilot site will receive ACRE and Everyone Can Work training. Staff added to the initial model from outside the VR agency include a project coordinator to “keep folks on task” and two fidelity scale administrators to ensure fidelity to SWTCIE services. Additionally, a VR media specialist will promote the project.

Spotlight on Illinois



Using both existing VR employees and newly hired staff, the Illinois SWTCIE staffing model will operate within six geographically diverse pilot sites. These six pilot sites are 14(c) certificate holders from diverse parts of the state that will each recruit and hire two employment specialists. The specialists will receive ACRE training on customized and supported employment and offer services to participants. All pilot site staff will attend training as part of the pilot site community onboarding. The project will use a community of practice across the pilot sites to share information, including problems and solutions, and to increase service fidelity. The strong partnership with the evaluator, trainer, and co-implementor, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), adds to the sense of community to promote service fidelity and contribute to the sustainability of the model once the grant project ends. UIUC staff who are part of the implementation team will provide oversight, technical assistance, and guidance, such as with hiring the employment specialists. Additionally, three UIUC liaisons will provide on-site technical assistance and report to the UIUC implementation staff. These liaisons will receive training in certified work incentive counselor services and assist the VR benefits counseling provider. To identify and recruit potential participant employers, the project will use an existing VR business developer.

Spotlight on Virginia



Virginia will implement its SWTCIE project in two pilot districts and plans to use a combination of both existing and newly hired staff. The project will use existing VR counselors to serve participants in their respective districts. The project recently pivoted to focus efforts on people considering sheltered employment due to recent state legislation phasing out subminimum wage employment, which has influenced their partnerships and project plans. Although they planned to hire VR counselors to specifically deliver SWTCIE services, they redesigned these positions due to difficulty identifying appropriate candidates. They plan to hire two district coordinators to facilitate project activities, serve as subject matter experts, support VR counselors, coordinate local advisory councils, and facilitate recruitment. Multiple partners will provide training and technical assistance, including on supported and customized employment service delivery, capacity building, and integrated resource teams. Additionally, staff working on the project can participate in one-hour weekly case consulting meetings. The project has focused on embedding sustainability to ensure succession of the project outcomes beyond the life of the grant.



Selecting new or additional staff

The size, roles, and job functions of the teams vary based on their service models, state contexts, and existing VR agency capacities. Some SWTCIE projects will use existing VR staff and provide additional training to align with project goals. For example, Georgia will use existing staff already trained to work with the participants. In contrast, Virginia will rely on a combination of newly hired staff and existing VR counselors. California will employ a mix of existing VR staff along with existing and newly hired non-VR staff. Illinois selected the 14(c) certificate holders through a notice of funding opportunity; each 14(c)-certificate holder recruited and hired their own staff and will implement the project separately, with oversight from VR and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (an implementation partner).

The projects report that these varied methods for staffing include both advantages and disadvantages. Using internal staff benefits these time-sensitive projects in three ways: (1) the staff are familiar with the needs of the intended population, (2) the approaches reduce the time to hire and onboard staff, and (3) staff can immediately engage in service delivery. SWTCIE project leaders reported some disadvantages of external hires within 14(c) certificate holders, such as preconceived biases about participants' CIE abilities and staff members' reluctance to engage in new and innovative service delivery techniques.



As we looked at the life of the project, and to make a true business model change, we needed the employment specialists to stay on beyond the period of the grant.... [Allowing the agencies to make the selection and choose the candidate] was a long-term solution and we wanted the agencies to have ownership over the [hiring of the] people who were working on this.

SWTCIE project leader

Creating new job roles to implement services gives SWTCIE projects an opportunity to bridge gaps in project implementation, embrace technology, and ensure project success. For example, Georgia and California recognized a need to hire a project coordinator to oversee daily project activities, promote cohesion, and direct service implementation. Virginia established a VR coordinator of interdisciplinary teams. Illinois will use a communication specialist to educate the public, advertise project services, and promote project resources through their website and social media platforms. Illinois also created a community liaison position to oversee service delivery and address technical assistance needs. Georgia will hire fidelity assessment coordinators to ensure fidelity of project service provision.

In keeping with the various state contexts, such as pending legislation to end subminimum wage employment, the projects deployed staff in various ways. The SWTCIE implementation locations range from one initial site at a 14(c) certificate holder in Georgia to two community colleges in California, two districts in Virginia, and six subgrantee 14(c) certificate holders in six diverse areas of Illinois. All of the project plans include a provision for the project business model to ultimately extend statewide.

Sustainability. The deployment mix of VR and external staff reflects different approaches to sustain CIE efforts. Facing the end of subminimum wage employment in January 2025, California seeks to sustain the project goals by partnering with community college programs, which will continue after the project ends. California will embrace the strength of their relationships with community college vendors to collaborate and tailor services based on participants' needs. Georgia will pilot their plan in one 14(c) certificate holder

facility, fine-tune the plan, and eventually add three more pilot sites. Over the course of the project, they will create a manual to describe best practices that can encourage sustainability of their goals. Illinois made strategic staff selections that provide opportunities for 14(c) certificate holders to eventually fund positions supporting CIE within their organizations beyond the four-year grant. To embed sustainability, Virginia recruited current employees, sourcing talent from other teams, departments, and job functions within their VR agencies to fill skill gaps, and they will invest in supported and customized employment training and capacity building for their staff.



Our counselors are working very closely with the staff that are delivering the services. They are the first touchpoint that the participants have with enrolling in the project, so they're having initial discussions with participants, getting consent forms signed, and then working closely with the staff as additional needs come up.... They're working closely with the project coordinator on the delivery side.

SWTCIE project leader

Challenges. SWTCIE projects reported some challenges with deploying staff, such as attrition and regulatory qualifications. For example, Virginia noted some unforeseen internal hiring challenges due to attrition caused by governmental job qualifications for VR counselors to have master's degrees, as well as time commitments and budgetary constraints. The California project increased their VR counselors' time from 50 percent to 100 percent because of the demands of recruitment, communicating with participants and families, and service delivery.



Preparing staff

As the foundation of their work, the SWTCIE projects will rely on a broad range of training and supports to onboard and equip staff.

Training content. Offering diversified training content can help projects' address the ever-changing public opinion and legislative landscape on the use of subminimum wage employment, so staff training is vital for reaching the CIE project goals. As an example, to promote proficiency in direct, person-centered service provision, the four interviewed SWTCIE projects will include training from the national Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE). ACRE certification involves specialized training, including customized and supported employment, that promotes advocacy through education to improve the quality of employment services and employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Additional trainings, such as Everyone Can Work, Certified Work Incentive Counselor training, specialized trainings to onboard staff, provider-driven training, and case consulting, aim to instill knowledge of the benefits of and the skills to support community employment for people with disabilities.

Training vendors. SWTCIE projects rely on recognized trainers from university research centers and private training programs to equip staff to deliver person-centered services (Exhibit 2). Several projects reported that an existing relationship between the state VR agency and the state university research center providing the training improves the efficacy of the training. Because of the importance of effective training and technical assistance, each project will work with at least two—and up to five—recognized trainers.

Exhibit 2. Training providers

SWTCIE project	University research centers	Private training programs
California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> San Diego State University Research Foundation-Interwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Resource Centers Griffin-Hammis Associates PolicyWorks SB639 Workgroup
Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Georgia Institute for Human Development and Disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Griffin-Hammis Associates
Illinois	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virginia Commonwealth University University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --
Virginia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virginia Commonwealth University George Washington University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Griffin-Hammis Associates National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative



Community engagement

In addition to training, SWTCIE projects involve community members and organizations to prepare staff. As part of team integration, members include interested parties with vested interest in supplying wraparound community support services to encourage participants along their path to CIE. Whether they call it a community of practice (as California and Illinois do), or a stakeholder advisory group (as Georgia does), or local advisory council (as in Virginia), the goal is to collaborate, offer feedback, and identify recommendations for staff to better implement SWTCIE projects. Including members of the community in the training incorporates buy-in and sustains project goals. For example, Georgia is offering the Everyone Can Work training to pilot site staff members, school systems, families, participants, and employers. Illinois is preparing guidance on encouraging CIE, advertising the project via email and social media, and housing the information on the SWTCIE-Illinois website for ease of accessibility.

References

Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE). "About Us." n.d. <https://www.acreducators.org/about-us.html>.

Griffin-Hammis Associates. "Everyone Can Work: Part 2 Additional Materials and Suggested Readings." 2023. <https://www.griffinhammis.com/everyone-can-work-materials/>.

This project is part of the 84.421D Disability Innovation Fund.

The contents of this brief were developed under grant number 91990020A0018/91990022F0347 from the Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C §§ 1221e-3 and 3474).▲