

Project: Disability determination and provision of vocational rehabilitation services: How good are the tools that are used?

Principal Investigator: Brigida Hernandez, Ph.D. (DePaul University)

Graduate Research Assistants: Elizabeth Horin and Andrea Saul (DePaul University)

Overview

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is a federal agency that is authorized to carry out key provisions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. By providing funds to state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies, RSA establishes programs that assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining employment and independent living goals. Services provided by state VR agencies include evaluation and counseling, job training and placement, educational assistance, equipment, and follow-up services.

Although VR agencies aim to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, outcomes have been poor. For instance, during the 1995 fiscal year, approximately 1.3 million people participated in VR programs. Of those served, 17% were considered rehabilitated, defined as having completed their rehabilitation program and been suitably employed for at least 60 days. Most rehabilitated clients were European-American (80%); less than one-tenth (9%) were of Hispanic origin (Kaye, 1998). For individuals of minority background, patterns of inequitable treatment within the vocational rehabilitation system have been prominent. Members of ethnic minority groups were less likely to be accepted into VR programs (Capella, 2002; Dziekan & Okoncha, 1993) and more likely to be placed on waiting lists (Zea et al., 1997) than European-Americans. Similarly, Dziekan and Okoncha (1993) found that ethnic minorities (namely, African-Americans, Latinos, Native-Americans, and Asian-Americans) applied for services at a higher rate than their representation in the population, and of these groups, Latinos and African-Americans were least likely to be accepted for services.

Purposes of the project

The purposes of this research project are to:

- 1) review existing literature concerning the assessment of ethnic minority individuals when making disability determination and providing vocational rehabilitation services;
- 2) investigate the most commonly used standardized tests, surveys, and procedures for making disability determination and providing VR services in the states of Illinois, California, Florida, and New York;
- 3) conduct a capacity-building workshop in the four aforementioned states to improve the process of disability determination and provision of VR services for ethnic minority clients;
- 4) develop and disseminate a practitioners' guide to culturally-competent diagnosing and service delivery; and
- 5) disseminate project findings via conferences (including a national conference sponsored by the center), research publications in rehabilitation/disability/psychology journals, and the center's website.