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10 Quality Indicators for Choosing a Community Rehabilitation Program

Cary Griffin & Dave Hammis, Senior Partners

In many communities across the U.S. today, adults with significant disabilities, as well as Special Education students and their families, have a choice of community employment service providers. Making that choice can be confusing and time consuming, but success as an adult (i.e. having a career you enjoy, making friends, belonging to your community) is directly tied to the efficiency, innovation, and leadership of the organization you choose. In our work at Griffin-Hammis Associates approximately 90% of our primary and secondary customers are Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and they represent tremendous folks, working hard everyday to change, to improve, and to build community (e.g. Easter Seals of Southern California; VIA of the Lehigh Valley; Cobb Community Services Board in Georgia; Progressive Employment Concepts in Citrus Heights California; Common Ground in New Hampshire; UWork in Utah; CIS in Philadelphia, PCS in Wisconsin, Job Squad, Inc., in West Virginia, just to name a few). However, this represents a rather small percentage of the adult service agencies in this country. Listed briefly below are some questions to explore when interviewing potential providers, and some thoughts on what progressive agencies are doing.

1. Does the CRP have proper Financial Management and Transparency?

Considerations: The CRP should have a record of solid fiscal management and Board meetings should be open to the public and especially welcoming to consumers and families. Further, there should be an on-going financial stability/improvement plan tied in with the overall strategy of the organization. Look also for the organization's commitment to helping staff, consumers, and families through their financial prowess: assisting with benefits analysis, creating small business loan or grant programs in collaboration with local financial entities, and leveraging dollars for homeownership opportunities for staff and consumers. Bottom line: is their money going to support inclusion, or does it go to support segregation?

2. Is there Representative Governance?

Considerations: Following the example from the Independent Living movement, Boards makeup of CRPs might benefit from being no less than 51% people with disabilities. This is not to say that all members with disabilities should have a particular disability label, but rather that people from all walks of life, including service recipients, should be included. An organization that serves people with

disabilities should be guided by them. Further, service on the Board should be guided by “job descriptions” for each member and membership on the Board should be hard to get. A rigorous recruitment plan should be employed that elevates the status of the members and the organization; and members should be schooled in the best practices of the day so that their decisions support inclusion and innovation.

3. Does the organization have a rigorous staff Continuing Education program?

Considerations: An organization that is not constantly investing in its knowledge base is falling behind. Implementing the latest innovations in employment, transportation, housing, benefits management, and inclusion takes a serious commitment. Look for alliances with colleges and universities; individualized staff development plans; enrollment in certification programs, etc.

4. Is the CRP actively Divesting in its “Parallel Systems?”

Considerations: For years CRPs were faced with providing their own residences in lieu of community housing, sheltered workshops in lieu of typical employers, and specialized transit in lieu of accessible public transportation. Today the trend is to build Social Capital (see: www.centerforsocialcapital.org) throughout the community and work to address these issues as community wide, not just disability related. Microenterprise expert Ernesto Sirolli suggests that within a mile of you, there are several people working on the same issue. A CRP needs to be engaged in joining and enhancing the existing systems instead of expending countless dollars replicating other systems. Employers already know how to create jobs; Housing Authorities, real estate professionals, and builders already understand homes, but the CRP may know about how to generate Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) for home ownership and should bring that to the problem-solving table (see www.griffinhammis.com; www.passplan.org; <http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition>; www.start-up-usa.biz; www.db101.org for more information on SSA work incentives and IDAs); and local transit folks know how to move people across town. In fact, in many cities where it is reported there is a lack of transportation, there are countless traffic jams, indicating to the contrary that there is actually too much transportation, but not enough social capital development. With social capital, the CRP would know the people in the cars and be able to leverage rides for people.

5. Does the CRP have a Commitment to the accumulation of Social Capital?

Considerations: Social Capital, defined as “the social networks and the norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity that arise from them,” is a powerful predictor of many social goods, including people’s health and happiness, levels of economic development, well-working schools, safe neighborhoods, and responsive government (Harvard, 2006). CRP leadership should be engaged in an active and planned social capital campaign that engages its staff and consumers in creating

opportunities for collaboration across major community sectors. The CRP should be working with civic groups, neighborhoods, employers, financial sectors, government, and others to create capacity for inclusion throughout the community.

6. Does the CRP have a plan for the Future?

Considerations: Ask for a copy of the latest strategic plan and ask how the organization is charting its way to progressive change and adaptation in the future. Is the CRP building capacity with a planful approach to increasing funding sources while providing financial oversight? Are the latest innovations in employment, including Customized wage employment and microenterprise being offered (for example, at VIA in Pennsylvania, as many as 8 funding sources have been amalgamated to assist a person in starting a business; at PEC in California, a foundation grant was used to fund a consumer-governed micro-lending entity)? Is the organization fully committed to providing services one-person-at-a-time? Is homeownership a major thrust of the residential program? Does the agency offer support with Social Security Work Incentives such as Plans for Achieving Self Support? This is a significant deficit within modern CRPs since SSA Work Incentives can liberate consumers (and families) by providing significant cash to an individual for going to college, getting a good paying job, or starting a business. Not offering these services after having been available for over 25 years in the Social Security Act is perhaps unethical.

7. Does the CRP develop Leadership at all levels?

Considerations: As mentioned before, a well-trained and intelligent workforce is vital to assisting you in getting a job and a home. This means that the staff you choose (or who are assigned to you) should have appropriate levels of authority to take discretionary action on your behalf. In other words, CRP personnel can speak for the agency; make decisions that are synchronized with your plan, and work for you with a strong sense of urgency. If the organization wallows in constant meetings; continually seeks permission to act from upper management; treads water while consumers go unemployed, it is time to look to another CRP for assistance.

8. Does the organization support Living Wages for all?

Considerations: The fact is that making ends meet in a CRP is tough. At issue here again, is the effort leadership makes to right the problem, increase salaries for staff and consumers, reduce turnover, and increase investment in personnel (Easter Seals of Southern California is especially adept at creating new funding sources for staff development and consumer support). Keeping quality staff requires an on-going investment in education, wages, benefits, and autonomy. Ask about the turn-over rate for staff and whether the agency sees the issue as “just normal for our industry” or as a serious problem they are taking steps to

address. Are there both monetary and non-monetary reward programs to enhance staff retention? Does the agency see “coverage” as the issue, or are they truly invested in developing a team of the best and brightest that assists consumers in achieving their goals? Are efforts being made to enlist and pay families, friends, or neighbors to provide support?

Does the organization still use piece rates or sub-minimum wages in their sheltered workshop; do they get jobs at sub-minimum wages in the community? Do you really want to make less-than-the-least? Progressive agencies are doing away with these wage practices.

9. Does the organization demonstrate Cultural Competence?

Considerations: Does the organization hire staff, at all levels, which reflect the cultural heritage of those served? Is there ethnic diversity throughout the organization, including the executive and Board levels? Can consumers and families access staff that speak the same primary languages? Are important documents made available in accessible formats? Are there people at all levels of the organization with disabilities and is there an active recruitment plan in place that demonstrates to the community that the organization believes people with disabilities can perform all types of jobs as well as people without disabilities?

10. Does the organization embrace Inventiveness?

Considerations: It’s been said that in tough economic times, the above quality indicators must be put on hold until money loosens up. However, today is the perfect time to get started on inventiveness. Government, in lean times, looks for innovations that work and are more likely to stretch their investments by funding promising practices. Over fifty years of data clearly indicate that sheltered workshops and day programs do not lead to real employment (i.e. the unemployment rate for people with disabilities remains at close to 75%), any more than living in a group home prepares someone for home ownership.

Is the organization trying to solve problems by doing the same things they’ve tried before, only perhaps with more intensity? Do they have a quality improvement plan that leads them down the dead-end road of doing all the wrong things the right way? Or is the organization challenging why they do things with the same vigor they challenge how they do things?

Inventiveness often simply means knowing the resources and rules that already exist, partnering to leverage capital and brainpower, and most especially putting a halt to using (i.e. paying for) methods and programs that do not work. The disability system is not poor; it spends its money on processes that don’t work.

Achieving perfection is not the point of these 10 indicators. Rather, consumers and families should be able to recognize that the organization is addressing these concerns as a work in progress. Find an agency that is changing and go with them.