

Spotlight on Diversity

Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR)



An interview with Dennis Martinez, Regional Business Relations Coordinator of ACCES-VR
Interviewed by: Andrea Todaro, Diversity Director, BNHRA

Andrea:

How did you get into Vocational Rehabilitation?

Dennis:

I fell into it. I had a master's degree, a big student loan, and needed to find employment, so I went to the NYSDOL for some career advice and job leads. They sent me a job lead for Niagara Frontier Vocational Rehabilitation Center, who hired me, despite the fact that I knew little about vocational rehabilitation at the time. Vocational Rehabilitation is like a well-kept secret, even though it's been around for almost 100 years. And, that's the way I started. I worked for several not-for-profit organizations for about 10 years and then had the opportunity to come to work for Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), which is now called ACCES-VR. I started off as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) at VESID and had a caseload of various people with various disabilities. Then I worked almost exclusively with people with substance abuse problems and after that, I started working in the placement and marketing business relations unit in 1993, where I have been ever since. My current title is Regional Business Relations Coordinator.

Andrea:

What do you like about the work you do?

Dennis:

I came from a background of working for an agency in Niagara County doing supported employment and I liked placement because it's the end process and it's what VR is all about. It's where the rubber meets the road and it has an element of closure to it. We can work with people for a long time and see minimal change, but when they get a job, that's where it all comes together. It's a really great feeling, seeing individuals go from unemployed, unhappy and dependent upon public assistance or social security, to actually getting a job, becoming self-sufficient and having renewed happiness and self-confidence. That's very rewarding and it's also nice to see employers find really great employees and make them happy, too, so in a sense I serve two masters...the people who are looking for a job and those who hire them. Really, the needle on the dial of employment of people with disabilities has not moved significantly in the last 25 yrs since the ADA became law. If I can move that needle a little bit more to the right side of the equation, I'll be very happy, because that's what it's all about.

Andrea:

Tell me more about the history of Vocational Rehabilitation...

Dennis:

As I mentioned, Vocational Rehabilitation is a well-kept secret, because not a lot of people know about it. Yet, it's been around since 1920 after World War. It was a mechanized war and a lot of soldiers came back from the war with disabilities such as missing limbs and what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. VR was set up to help soldiers, mostly with physical disabilities and later, it was expanded to civilians with physical disabilities. Then, it was expanded yet again, to include individuals with all types of disabilities. It is one of the oldest social programs around. 2020 it will be 100 yrs old. ACCES-VR is part of New York State's VR program. There is another NYS program and that is the NYS Commission for the Blind, an organization who does VR for individuals with visual impairments. Every state and territory has a VR program; it's a federally mandated, funded program consisting of 70-80% federal funds and the rest the state. But, every state has one or two programs that are housed and put together differently. We're under the NYS Educational Department but the Commission is under the Office of Child and Family Services.

Andrea:

How is your organization set up?

Dennis:

There are 15 local offices in NYS and Buffalo is the largest. It covers 8 counties of WNY. We have about 35 vocational rehabilitation counselors at the Buffalo ACCES-VR District Office, which are Masters level people and they each have a caseload, often assigned according to geography. Each counselor's caseload is around 150-175 people; it varies but that's the average. At any one time in this area, we have between 5000-6000 people in the ACCES-VR system in various stages of the employment and training process. Success for us is a person who is employed for 90 days and last year, we placed and successfully rehabilitated about 1200

people. The ratio of successful to non-successful cases is around 55%, a little better than half. Even though Buffalo has historically had a more sluggish economy than New York City, the Buffalo District Office has quite consistently been the office with the highest placement results. We attribute that to our relationship with our vendors and contractors that help train our consumers, prepare them for work and place them. I believe that we have an extremely strong relationship with our partners. In order to be a VRC, you have to be a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and possess a Master's in Vocational Counseling or related degree.

Andrea:

What companies have been the forerunners in WNY of hiring individuals with disabilities and incorporating it into their diversity initiatives?

Dennis:

Some that come to mind immediately, although this is certainly not a complete list, are Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Catholic Health, Home Depot, Wegmans, Ingram Micro, M&T Bank, and Dollar General. Those are the only ones I can think of offhand, but there are lots of them out there. There are hundreds of companies who have successfully employed people with disabilities through our agency and its partners. Disability owns no particular occupational area. We have worked with entry level unskilled people all the way up to managerial professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and engineers. It's as diverse as the general population itself.

We've had several employers come in and do presentations for our job candidates and vocational counselors on hiring standards, protocol and their application process, such as Home Depot, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Roswell Park. We also have several additional employers who have expressed an interest in doing presentations in the near future.

Andrea:

Please tell me more about how a person becomes enrolled for services/who qualifies as well as the training opportunities available:

Dennis:

What we do is try to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities. It's not an entitlement program; it's based upon eligibility. A person has to have a documented disability, which results in a substantial impediment to employment. Our services have to be required for them to go to work and they have to have an interest in employment. That being said, once that eligibility is established, then the individual will work closely with their counselor to come up with a plan for achieving their vocational goal. Not everyone who comes to us knows or has any type of plan in mind. Sometimes, we do an assessment to identify their interests, abilities and aptitudes and once they've determined that, they work closely with their counselor to come up with a job goal that they would like and is realistic, based upon not only their abilities but also the current job market. We typically research the job market to see if the occupational goal is viable. So, based upon those factors, a plan for employment and steps are outlined to achieve that goal. It might involve short-term or long-term training as well as different educational opportunities. Not only do we train people to be entry-level workers or obtain certificates from short-term training programs but we also sponsor two and four year degree programs, tailored to one's vocational goal. We can also provide the tools, equipment and transportation necessary for that individual to become trained in those areas. Some of our services are contingent upon

economic need but we've recently relaxed our requirements so that now they're at 400% of the federal poverty level, which lets in a lot more people than it used to.

The other type of employment is working in a business for self and we can help with that. We have several success stories of individuals whom we've helped to open their own business. ACCES-VR can provide technical assistance, referrals and small business start-up funding for a viable self employment plans and when an individual can demonstrate their ability to successfully manage a self employment initiative. Self-employment typically requires an individual entrepreneur to seek assistance from a range of sources (e.g., New York State Entrepreneurial Assistance Programs and/or Small Business Development Centers). Self-employment initiatives run the gamut from initiatives that rely on a specific location (a store, a farm) or based on a consumer's particular skill or occupation (accountant, artist). Self-employment ventures can function as sole proprietorships, partnerships or as a franchise.

Andrea:

What are the incentives available to employers for hiring people with disabilities?

Dennis:

One of the business incentives is that the person with a disability is a trained, ready, willing and able worker but we can also provide incentives that are like the icing on the cake. We have federal and state tax credits and wage reimbursement programs. There are two kinds of wage reimbursement programs: one is called the Work Try Out (WTO) and that one focuses on an individual trying a job. A Work Try Out allows an employer to see how someone can do a job who may not have a lot of experience. They have the training but they don't have a lot of experience. So an employer puts the individual on their payroll, adhering to all the state and federal laws concerning employment and while the individual is working, the employer is being reimbursed for 100% of the person's gross wages for three months or 480 hours. If an employer decides to retain that individual after the three month period, the reimbursement is theirs. Even if the employer is not pleased and decide not to retain the individual after the first three months, they still get the reimbursement. So, it's a win/win situation for the employer. The other wage reimbursement, an On-the-Job-Training (OJT) is a little bit more of a commitment on the employer's part. They agree to train an individual on the job in exchange for the wage reimbursement. The wage reimbursement in that case is 100% and up to 26 weeks or 6 months. The employer needs to define the specific job duties and what the individual is going to be taught and what they're going to achieve and at the end of the training, the employer is expected to retain the individual for the job. Now the two can be used together, although one or the other is the most advantageous way of doing it. Otherwise it makes for a long stretch of time where there's a bit of uncertainty. So, we usually do a WTO or an OJT, yet they can be used together in certain circumstances.

Andrea:

What kinds of community events and partnerships have you formed, as they pertain to work diversity?

Dennis:

October is National Disabilities Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), so every October there is an event to honor employers who have been nominated by our partners for recognition

in providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We award these businesses with plaques and a luncheon, presentations and speakers. We typically have between 100-150 attendees with approximately 15 employer nominees. There are different categories of nominations and the WNY Employment Consortium sponsors this event. We put out an Employer of the Year Award in addition to the NDEAM Awards.

Also, we've been doing diversity career fairs with our community partners like Innovative Placements, the Erie County Office for the Disabled, and the Buffalo Employment and Training Center (BETC). We have helped coordinate and host two career fairs at the BETC and four at the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library. The downtown branch of the Buffalo library has generously donated their space and advertising for us to host a diversity career fair held in honor of special months, which recognize individuals with disabilities, such as NDEAM in October, which we previously mentioned, Autistic Awareness Month in April, and Disability Mentoring Day (DMD). It's a diversity career fair that's open to the public, although there's an emphasis on people with disabilities. We have employers there who do presentations on the hiring process as well as cover letter and resume critiques. We have also had a "speaker series" in which former job seekers share their success stories and employment tips with an audience of current job seekers.

Several local colleges have helped plan and organize these events, inviting their students to attend. Finally, BNHRA has served as a sponsor and partner for our career fairs. The BNHRA diversity committee is very actively involved in planning our diversity career fairs and participating in them, as well. I currently sit on the committee and enjoy participating in planning diversity events. In particular, I enjoy educating employers on the benefits of hiring a diverse workforce that includes individuals with disabilities. Although the category of individuals with disabilities may not have been considered as much a part of a diversity plan years ago, that seems to have changed quite a bit for the better. I believe that there's increased sensitivity awareness and interest in this untapped pool of workforce talent and am excited about contributing to that trend in any way my partners and I can.

Any employer who is interested in being a part of our community events and utilizing our job placement services may contact me at:

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