Delivering Community-Based Services: Strategies for Managing Field-Based Transition Staff

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The Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project is a 5-year, two-group, randomized controlled trial funded by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2013. Six sites were awarded funding to test the effectiveness of a multicomponent experimental intervention for improving academic, career, and financial outcomes for youth with disabilities receiving supplemental security income (SSI) benefits and their families. Awardees include Arkansas, ASPIRE (a consortium of six western states), California, Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin.

Overview

Maryland PROMISE enrolled 997 transition-aged youth recipients of supplemental security income (SSI) into program services. These services were managed by a community-based organization (CBO) which was responsible for monitoring and supervising staff hired to deliver the intervention services. The service delivery structure for Maryland PROMISE divided the state into five geographic regions: Baltimore City, Eastern, Northern, Southern, and Western. Each region had a supervisor, and several intervention teams, comprised of a case manager, family employment specialist, and benefits counselor. The teams also collaborated with local school personnel. At any given time, there were as many as 70 field-based staff working across the state.

These teams were responsible for providing all of the intervention components of Maryland PROMISE for each participant assigned to receive services which included: (1) community-based work experiences, (2) educational supports, (3) family-centric case management support to address social service needs, and (4) financial/benefits counseling.

Practices to Effectively Manage Field-Based Staff

Since the majority of PROMISE services were delivered to youth in the community rather than in an office setting, there were dozens of field-based PROMISE team members working in the five designated geographic regions across the state. This situation posed supervision challenges for communication and accountability. In order to address these issues, Maryland PROMISE developed systematic strategies for managing staff. Below we share the practices used by Maryland PROMISE to maintain field-based intervention teams' productivity and focus on project outcomes.

Practice 1: Set Clear Expectations

To deliver the intervention components with fidelity, Maryland PROMISE set expectations for both case managers and employment specialists. As outlined in Table 1 weekly targets were established to document key service activities, which included: participant contact, community linkages,

school personnel collaboration, employer outreach, and work experience placements. These targets were based on PROMISE leadership team's experience with delivery of the same services for similar research and demonstration projects (e.g., *Youth Transition Demonstration*, Marriott Foundation's *Bridges from School to Work*). Staff progress on these targets was tracked in the project's management information system (MIS). A monthly report was generated from these data and shared with team supervisors. These reports allowed Maryland PROMISE to better manage staff, discuss efforts, set goals, and provide feedback on progress toward outcomes. These data also informed project leadership on training and technical assistance needs to help staff meet project goals.

Table 1: Example of expectations for Maryland PROMISE Case Managers and Employment Specialists

Case Manager	Employment Specialist
Make 8 – 10 participant (youth/family) contacts per week (e.g., face-to-face, phone, email, text)	
Conduct 3-5 contacts with community resources/linkages including but not limited to education, adult linkages, mental/physical health providers per week	Make 8 – 10 employer contacts and/or consultations (e.g., face-to-face, phone, email) per week
Maintain contact with school personnel on behalf of PROMISE youth that have provided a release of information consent form for school	Conduct 3-5 employer appointments, such as Informational Interviews and/or employer presentations per week
Facilitate unpaid or paid work experiences for 50% of active caseload	

Practice 2: Professional development and training opportunities coupled with on-going field-based support

Maryland PROMISE provided targeted training and on-going field-based technical assistance (TA) to the field-based staff.

Overall, the investment in training and support contributed to achieving high fidelity to the MD PROMISE intervention (Luecking, Crane, Gingerich, and Morris, in press). Table 2 provides examples of the training and technical assistance offered to staff. Case managers and employment specialists who participated in the full-menu of focused training opportunities achieved significantly improved work-based experiences and competitive paid employment outcomes for enrolled youth, compared to their peers who did not access the intensive training support (Gold et. al., 2018).

Table 2: Examples of Maryland PROMISE Training and Technical Assistance

Training	• Boot Camp: Maryland PROMISE Intervention • Planning and Facilitating Quality Work Experiences • Competency-based National Certificate in Employment Services, Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) training • Graduate Certificate in Career Planning and Placement for Youth in Transition (from the University of Maryland) • Motivational Interviewing • Trauma Informed Care • Health and Safety Practices	
Technical Assistance	"Needs and Leads" Meetings	Technical Assistance Specialists work with staff teams to share best practices, troubleshoot challenges and brainstorm next steps to meet goals for each participant presented.
	Individual Staff Supervision with Supervisor and Technical Assistance Specialist	Participant specific support and brainstorm to target employment intervention-based next steps and support needs.
	Field Based Technical Assistance	Technical Assistance Specialists model and support Staff based on performance management data driven identified areas of need with intervention implementation.

Practice 3: Monitor performance and communicate regularly

Central to Maryland PROMISE successful implementation was the ability to track staff efforts, service fidelity, and program performance. We used three performance management reports to accomplish this: (1) an intervention report, (2) a fidelity report, and (3) a performance matrix. These monthly reports provided a snapshot of progress toward achieving project outcomes. These reports were of value in that they: (1) assisted project supervisors to track outcomes and progress being made each month through aggregate numbers for each staff and within each region; (2) offered a comparison of activity and outcomes between staff and regions to assist in determining best practices; (3) provided project leadership a basis for goal setting based on desired outcomes of specific interventions; (4) highlighted the need for strategic technical assistance to promote optimal outcomes ; and (5) offered a basis for evaluating program and staff performance. The reports are summarized below and in Table 3.

Intervention Report: Supervision and implementation of service delivery per participant was monitored by tracking key intervention components by individual staff. Each time staff provided a service to a PROMISE participant they recorded it in the project's custom designed Management Information System (MIS). These data allowed for real-time tracking of service delivery, and allowed staff and their supervisors to track progress being made with each youth on their caseload. As a result, staff were better able to manage their caseload and prioritize their day-to-day

activities. Supervisors also used the report to better triage issues as they emerged and target staff training and support.

Fidelity Report: As part of the formative evaluation for Maryland PROMISE, data pertaining to services, activities, and results were regularly reviewed by project leadership. This Fidelity Report provided data across all elements of performance that spanned the scope of the key intervention components of Maryland PROMISE (i.e., case management, work experience/employment, benefits/ financial services). These data were presented in aggregate for all of Maryland PROMISE and disaggregated by the regional intervention teams described earlier in this *Brief*. The data elements included in the Fidelity Report were aligned with the Maryland PROMISE performance measures.

Performance Matrix: The performance measures for Maryland PROMISE were aligned with the principle intervention components and the specified intervention outcomes related to education completion, employment and financial independence. Across the three areas of focus, multiple performance measures were tracked. This monthly report offered a basis for evaluating program and staff performance, and was particularly used to inform goal setting related to intervention fidelity and assisted in prioritizing individualized interventions

Table 3: Maryland PROMISE Performance Management Reports

Tool	Purpose
Intervention Report & Staff Tracker	• Provided detailed data on service activity which allowed management to set staff goals and specific tasks to achieve desired outcomes for each participant on the caseload • Helped case managers, employment specialists, and supervisors manage and prioritize caseloads • Assisted in tracking outcomes to date and progress with each participant on the caseload • Highlighted challenging cases to bring to management to problem-solve and provide support as needed
Fidelity Report	• Provided aggregate data directly from the Intervention Report (MIS) • Assisted PROMISE leadership in comparing activity levels within fidelity interventions between regions and as a whole at-a-glance • Allowed PROMISE leadership to compare changes in outcomes over time, month-by-month and year-by-year
Performance Matrix	• Tracked outcomes and progress being made through aggregate numbers • Provided basis for goal setting to achieve desired outcomes of specific interventions • Highlighted trends and areas needing support • Provided a basis for evaluating progress

Conclusion

This *Brief* illustrated the approach used by Maryland PROMISE to manage and support field-based staff. The strategies included setting targets for staff performance, supporting staff in delivering services, and tracking data on progress toward achieving project outcomes. Monthly reports were generated to assist Maryland PROMISE management and staff to identify trends within and across the project and to triage issues as they emerged and problem solve solutions with staff. Clearly defined, measurable expectations communicated to and shared with all staff played a key role in the MD PROMISE intervention fidelity and outcomes achieved. Moreover, these processes have potential utility for any program or service that incorporates services delivered by field-based staff. As the emphasis for supporting youth and adults with disabilities shifts from provision of services to achievement of individual goals and outcomes, including work, and from providing services and supports in segregated settings to the community, capturing, analyzing, and communicating service-delivery data becomes increasingly important. While community-based work experiences require staff to be in the field on a regular basis, supervisors can use the practices discussed above to better manage and support field-based staff to monitor performance toward intended outcomes.

References

Gold, P., Fabian, E., Brodock, A., Morris, T., Crane, K., & Gramlich, M. (2018). The effect of competency-based training on staff performance and retention in Maryland PROMISE. Maryland Department of Disabilities.

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