Focus Group Interview Report
Counselors and Case Coordinators

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Study Background

This report is a summation of two focus group interviews of counselors and case coordinators from the federally funded Wisconsin PROMISE research and demonstration project. The stated purpose of **PROMISE** is to assist youth with disabilities, and their families, during the transition into adulthood across key domains, resulting in increased household income and reduced dependence on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in adulthood. Two of the main foci of services are employment and postsecondary education, however, work incentives benefits counseling, soft skills development, financial literacy, and self-determination are among the other transition domains also addressed by **PROMISE** staff.

The research component of **PROMISE** involves evaluating the project in a variety of ways. In addition to the experimental design that will evaluate the efficacy of **PROMISE** services and coordination on postsecondary employment and transition, the formative tasks of the research team include gauging the implementation of the project and providing feedback for improvement or change during implementation phases. This qualitative study included two focus group interviews and represents one contribution to the work.

Method

Population and Location Context

Wisconsin is a large state with a moderately diverse racial/ethnic population. Additionally, the statewide implementation of **PROMISE** means that participants live in diverse geographical areas in terms of population density (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural locales). The three focus groups included in this study were open to voluntary participation from all **PROMISE** counselors and case coordinators. These staff members were invited to attend a group on March 9, 2016, following other **PROMISE**-related meetings. The counselors and coordinators represented consumers from across all dimensions of diversity (i.e., race/ethnicity, locale, age, family background).

Sample

The counselors and case coordinators comprised a diverse group of 22 participants in this focus group study. Thirteen of the case coordinators identified themselves as White or Caucasian, six identified as Black, one as Asian, one as Hispanic, and one participant declined to self-identify race/ethnicity. Ten stated they had master's degrees and about half of these were licensed counselors. Two of the participants were male. The research team was comprised of White women with professional degrees in rehabilitation psychology and special education. The years of experience as counselors, case managers, and/or service providers ranged from 1 to 30 years of experience, with 10 participants having 10 or fewer years of experience and 5 having between 11 and 30 years of experience.

Project Context

The **WI PROMISE** was in its 24th month of implementation of direct services with participants, at the time of the focus group interviews. Because enrollment was ongoing at the time of the focus groups, counselors and case coordinators were at various stages of implementation with consumers. At the time of this focus group study, 84% of enrollment in the study was complete and approximately 50% of the intervention group members had been successfully recruited and were in various stages of service implementation with PROMISE staff.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this project:

1. What provider-strategies connect consumers to **PROMISE** resources?
2. What factors delay or block consumers' availability to work with service providers?
3. What factors facilitate service delivery?
4. How do service providers' perceptions vary across groups of consumers based on race/ethnicity, SES, and disability?

Data Collection and Analysis

A team of three researchers organized focus group interviews to be held at three central locations for counselors and case coordinators who were either traveling to [City] for **PROMISE** meetings or working in the capital city. All focus groups occurred on March 9, 2016. Participation was voluntary and followed requisite institutional approval for research with human subjects. The interview durations ranged from an hour to slightly under two hours. Interview questions are included in the appendix of this document.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and Anderson and Trainor analyzed the content of the interview using both deductive and inductive methods of analysis. We were interested in the responses to the questions on the interview protocol, but we also paid attention to the comments of counselors and case coordinators that were generated by the participants without being prompted by our questions. We used a generic, thematic approach to analysis, looking for patterns of responses and ideas shared by participants (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Patton, 2015). We collaboratively analyzed data and discussed variations in interpretation. The range of data is limited and no disagreements surfaced.

Results

The focus group interviews surface a wealth of information and counselor and case coordinator perspectives on the early stages of the project's implementation. Results can be categorized as coordinators' responsibilities and roles, challenges for coordinators and consumers, and project component's costs and benefits in the promotion of access to transition resources.

Strategies for Working with Consumers

Case coordinators had many strategies for working with consumers. Some of these came from their past experiences as vocational rehabilitation or other licensed counselors, others came from their experiences working within communities as service providers. The key strategies included

A. Knowing one's roles and responsibilities,
B. Building trust and relationships
C. Using flexible approaches to meet participant needs.

Knowing responsibilities and roles

Case coordinators' perceptions about their roles and responsibilities aligned with the various stages of project implementation. Several case coordinators who were continuing to get consumers enrolled and started in the project talked about the challenges of the distribution and set up of the technology.

Consumers who were part of the **PROMISE** Services (experimental) group received tablet computers. For those who worked with families without regular and consistent access and experience with the Internet, coordinators were challenged to connect with consumers to distribute tablets. A minority of coordinators expressed that their own lack of background

knowledge in technology contributed to challenges relevant to tablet and Internet set up; however, a majority also acknowledged that the consumers were incentivized by **PROMISE**'s tablet provision, both for personal use and transition related application.

Most focused on their roles as counselors, either to extend students transition opportunities and knowledge or to address crises. Some described themselves as bridging transition information and services between home and school. For example, Wilma said.

> So right now, I'm currently connecting them with job developers and helping walk them through with selecting them and, you know, making their first, kind of, professional-types of calls and coordinating that kind of stuff. … Every family is different, so some families may be dealing with some crisis and they need some referrals, and … I use Wraparound [City Name] to kind of help with those kind of, you know, wraparound services that, for services that I can't provide. For example, they can get a mentor, they can get additional support in schools.

> Nadia's comment underscored the importance of vocational rehabilitation oriented counseling. But it just felt like when you got a student, they had had no real counseling and guidance, and they had been given a lot of misinformation about DVR, and the family was really confused because they're hearing it from other people in the community. So I feel like when I'm getting my 14- and 15-year-olds, the family is, you know, we're the ones telling them about DVR, as opposed to them hearing about it in the community, or from just the schools. Like there's more of a holistic, like a well-rounded introduction to the transition process…

One novel aspect of the role of the case coordinators, particularly those with a vocational rehabilitation background, was the need to work more closely with schools than they had previously done. While working with the public schools to coordinate services, attend IEP meetings, and work collaboratively on planning presented logistical challenges, the case coordinators reacted positively to this aspect of their jobs and felt that it benefitted families and students.

On the other hand, in schools and districts where services have been historically challenging to coordinate and where institutional issues around resources and organization have emerged, teacher and counselor collaboration has been slower to develop. Several case coordinators mentioned this in regard to working with middle school populations; they liked getting started with younger students but teachers at middle schools were less familiar with collaborative efforts in transition.

> Ursula stated, It's a good transition for DVR to be more involved when they're younger, and with the families, to be, just did it, and what Nadia said, because they were getting the false information and not clear information, or what the expectations were and that kind of stuff with VR. I think it's been working well. … DVR being involved at an earlier age is hopefully

something that VR is going to look to in the future and not wait until they're about ready to graduate from high school.

Counselors also noted that in working with their **PROMISE** families, the need to assist with logistics and resource coordination extended beyond what may typically be required. The need to arrange more resources for **PROMISE** families when compared with a typical non-**PROMISE** vocational rehabilitation caseload was consistent. Mellody reflected,

> … running around trying to get these kids' documentations and things like that, like I would literally meet the kid at school and like make a copy of birth certificates and Social Security cards to bring to the job developer for them…I probably was like more like going above and beyond than what, but I was thinking, you know, these kids really want to work and, you know, I don't want a barrier to be that parents can't get it to the job developer or whatever have you so I was like, hey, it is what it is, tell your mom to send it with you to school, I'll meet you at the school to make copy and stuff like that and bring it to job developer…

Exercising an appreciation of the role of using the evidence-based and evidence-informed **PROMISE** services was also identified as important in making a difference. Kelly shared her perspective,

> And then I have those, the troubled youth who the job developers again don't want to work with. But I say to them we've found through research that getting them work really has a dramatic effect. I can't tell you why, you know, but I can tell you that it happens. So they are, based on your VR experience they're not ready but based on my experience they are and it's exactly what they need. So, it's kind of, and it is amazing to see that change in the youth.

Kelly shared another example specific to the importance of building the resource teams and the role this plays in serving as a resource,

> I do think I'm putting my families in touch with more resources… I'm building that resource team…One of the nice ways to start that out with is with work incentives consultation and also the financial capability, and the piece coming from regular VR, the piece that was just really amazing to me was, you know, you'd talk with DVR consumers about transportation and child care and those kind of things, but now being in **PROMISE** and getting Mom a job, I am so much more aware of all of those plates that Mom has and how that affects what can and can't happen. So *I feel like a bigger part of a resource than I did as regular VR.*

Building trust and relationships

Establishing trust and building ongoing relationships with both youth and their families, particularly parents, emerged as a key strategy. Counselors underscored the importance of repeatedly attempting to contact youth and families, particularly those who did not respond immediately, as several families did not engage until several months following enrollment in PROMISE. The concept of not giving up on youth and families, building trust through continued interest and contact, and working with families to identify and support positive options for the youths' future emerge as important components in establishing trusting relationships. Debbie shared,

I'm finding that the families are, number one, really resilient and, number two, I don't think when they come into the program initially that they realize that they're as open to possibilities as they find going through…we talk about the possibility or talk about what they could do and all of that and then they're like, huh, well, I never really thought about that. And then we explore it and they're just amazed with what their child is able to do, so they start to, you know, really open up and start to have a lot of confidence in their child that they may not have had before.

Mellody noted a similar experience,

Mom called and she was just so appreciative because she was like thank you for not giving up on us, you know…the parents not knowing because they're younger, they're 14, 15, so they haven't had those conversations about where do you see your child working? Like if they could work right now, what would that look like? They're like I haven't really thought about that, you know, but that gives me some kind of hope to know that they could possibly work somewhere.

Building good rapport and working alliances and developing a deeper understanding of the complexities in working with low-income families emerged as an important reflection as shared by Uma,

I think one of my favorite parts about being in this is that you have a chance to really get to know the youth, their family and what's going on in their world and you start to get a picture, like a really good picture of what kind of barriers and challenges and things are getting in their way, kind of like you were saying about Mom's getting a job but now all of a sudden, you know, the youth's not showing up to as many appointments that they were before and how it all interlaces together and can have effects on different pieces…*I feel like one of the biggest powers is that we actually hear them, you know, we're listening. And we're learning their language, we're learning their experience.*

Uma further explained that,

> There are families that I spend time counseling with because they're working through family dynamic issues, challenges with the school, fears about getting into the work world, fears about transition. I mean, there's a lot of pieces that are out there and there are, you know, certain families that you work with that are pretty good. *They just really need you to be that service manager that helps things move forward.*

Using flexible approaches and assuming readiness

The need to think creatively and use alternative approaches to service coordination and delivery with **PROMISE** youth and families is important. Meeting with families at times and locations outside typical working hours is often required to accommodate parents who may be working multiple jobs. Counselors also discussed the need to use approaches that differ from "traditional" vocational rehabilitation processes in that all elements of an individual's plan do not need to be clearly identified in order to begin service delivery. The ability to be flexible with timelines and the option to put service delivery on pause as needed while the family is addressing other issues and ensuring them that when they are ready to re-engage, **PROMISE** will be there.

Reconsidering the concept of "readiness" before determining whether someone is ready to work and move to job development and placement services is consistent with traditional "train-then-place" models. Rather, **PROMISE** counselors noted that the assumption must be made that all participants are ready to engage in some aspect of the process, which reflects the "place-then-train" philosophy consistent with improved competitive integrated employment outcomes. Kelly shared, "I think it's more along the lines of kind of like IPS [Individual Placement and Support], you know, they're ready, let's try to help them be successful and not completing a temporary work experience, or what is a learning experience, is not a failure". Other counselors shared similar reflections, with Oxana explaining,

> I think I come from the viewpoint that all the kids are ready. It just depends on for them what that ready means. If that means that they're ready for the Skills to Pay the Bills class or if they're ready for temporary work or if they're ready for job shadows, but kind of all of that is just one big ball of getting ready for an actual job, but they're all ready to start taking some sort of step.

Debbie noted a similar perspective and experience,

> If we're not sure where to go with our plan, I just feel like that is one of the best ways to really gather that information so that we can move forward and we have a better idea of a direction. I feel like they're always ready for something…we've had to be a little bit more creative…you just have to step out of the box. But they're always ready for something.

Uma explained her perspective on how **PROMISE** allows her to reframe readiness for service delivery in a contemporary context to allow for more flexibility in better serving her families,

> I think that there's a different perception of readiness in a global format compared to an immediate format. So, VR because of the way that it's structured has a tendency to go are you ready now? Okay, I'm giving you this short period of time to be ready and if you're not, you can go and do your thing and come back when you are. Whereas **PROMISE** looks at it as, all right, we have this really liberal period of time and support and hope that we want to be part of your getting, being and succeeding in your readiness. So let's see where we can step in in that process. So, I don't know if it's, the term is different or it's just the approach to it is different.

Challenges and Facilitators

A number of issues were identified that present as both challenges and facilitators including time, parental engagement, technology, and service provider capacity.

Time and scheduling

The single most consistent challenge that emerged from case coordinators comments was the issue of time and scheduling with busy families. Parents and coordinators were strapped for time. In rural areas, much of the coordination happens over the telephone because travel is so time-consuming. Visiting the students at schools took time, and often the families cited time as a factor in either not coming to meetings or not responding to communication. Similarly, case coordinators were consistent with their approach to facilitating the work that needed to be done with consumers: Building relationships was a priority for them.

> Jesinia pointed out that trust was easier to build because her role as a case coordinator was outside the typical child welfare model that some parents knew and avoided, *"They feel safer talking with me, because there's no judgment."*

The counselors shared that it also takes a considerable amount of time to coordinate and gather timely information from service providers, which add complexity in managing their caseloads. There was general consensus that more proactive communication from providers would be helpful.

Ida explained that, "If I didn't have to follow up with those service providers saying, hey, have you gotten in contact with this family in the two weeks since I referred you to get this rapid engagement, to get a job shadow going, I could have so much more time for meaningful contacts with my families."

Once trusting relationships were established with the parents and the youth, some of the timing challenges dissipated. As Laila explained:

I mean, and so I think I needed to build that relationship with the parents, first, and the trust, and get them services going, in order for me to be able to say, oh, yeah, you can go and see the child. And a lot of times, you know, it's, yeah, I'm trying to get them moving, trying to get the kids going.

On the other hand, a barrier in one instance can amount to a facilitator in another. Nadia stated,

I've found that my rural schools are more open to me just walking in. I have really great, close relationships with those teachers. I find in the [City] schools I'm closer to the speech and language therapists, or like teachers and things like that. I spend, I would say, I spend a lot of time in schools just talking to teachers, talking to principals, talking to psychologists, meeting with students there. I think, I would say the bulk of my time is met at schools.

Connecting with families

Engaging parents and guardians also presented as both a challenge and a facilitator. Counselors shared examples of youth who were highly engaged and interested in participating but their parent wasn't actively engaged in the process. Ida noted, "especially when the kid might be in the mindset let's jump in and the parent wants to cool off". The counselors noted that in a non-**PROMISE** situation, many of these cases would be closed. However, the **PROMISE** model allows and encourages counselors to continue contacting the family, which has facilitated engagement over time.   Uma shared,

Some of the challenges I face are the disengaged parents. They sign up their kid and I'm really, after we go through the process I'm really not too sure why they did because there is just no support from them… But I think the beauty of **PROMISE** is like in normal VR we would just say, okay, you know, you're not ready. But, you know, I tend to just back off, I'll do the 30-day contacts and, you know, we got a couple of years to go here and hopefully, you know, the parents turn around.

Debbie noted a similar experience and the need to meet families where they're at, while persisting at making contact,

I know when I have that I'll try to do like a negotiation, like if kid really wants to jump in and get working and Mom's like, well, we're not quite ready for that…And they'll say, yeah, just, you know, give me a little bit of time and I'll be like, okay, is it okay to call, you know, give you a call in a month or so and just see how things are going then and that usually holds onto that rapport, that they know that I'm caring but I'm still ready to go at their pace and waiting until they're ready to go again.

Technology

Technology was discussed as both a strength and challenge in connecting and working with families. Texting was clearly outlined as a key strategy in connecting with families who otherwise would not respond to other forms of communication such as phone calls. Making the iPads and tablets available, as engagement enhancements appeared to work well in many cases but the ongoing technological needs of families presented workload challenges to counselors and case coordinators. Counselors shared that dealing with issues related to the iPads and tablets has appreciably taken more time than anyone anticipated and also requires an IT skill set that many counselors don't feel comfortable in absorbing. Earlena shared,

Especially with having the tablets in the mix, that's been a challenge with a lot of the families. I mean, I've got families who ordered things from back in October, and they still don't have them, and they're calling, or they get them, and they're not working, and I'm calling, and then it's like now I'm suddenly IT support, and it's like that's taking time away from what I need to do.

Debbie and Ida noted similar experiences and reflected on the additional workload technology has created,

And another thing that's coming up quite a bit, too, with the iPads and as people have had iPads for much longer, there's a lot more IT-like repair questions and all of this other stuff that's really adding a huge dynamic. I don't know about you guys but I'm getting calls almost daily in regards to I have this issue with my iPad, I have this issue with my iPad. So I feel like now I'm spending, you know, an additional percentage on IT, which I know nothing about or trying to find vendors, or trying to find vendors that might potentially be able to help and all of that, too, so that's also taking extra time.

I spend so much time on that business care line…there was a week that I spent literally four hours on the phone with T-Mobile for one tablet because it came broken and we were trying to figure out and I'm sitting there like I have a master's degree to be on the phone with T-Mobile, like this is wonderful. So, that part has been I think unexpectedly a time-suck for many of us.

Service providers

Availability and quality of service providers varies across the state and counselors and case coordinators are skilled in navigating these situations. Discussion around timing of services, lack of consistent quality service provision, and lack of choice in service providers in areas of the state took place. Much of the focus was on job developers and the need to improve knowledge and skill in this area as well as improve professionalism and business practice. However, similar to the technology issue, both challenges and facilitators emerged. In the context of service providers, the concerns appear to be statewide with smaller regional pockets having more resources in this area than others. One counselor shared,

Unfortunately I feel like sometimes it feels that same way with the job developers. I feel like it takes way too long to complete services. I'm not hearing as often as I should be. I'm trying to track down reports. They're wanting to bill without reports in the system. I feel like there's not enough professionalism among our job developers in some areas, too.

Kelly stated a similar perspective,

"I want all of my kids to like just really take off and fly. And when you get into the more significantly disabled youth, it seems like that's where at least my experience has been with a couple of providers where the services really fall down."

Counselors also noted an interesting occurrence with service providers stating that many are unfamiliar in serving youth and do not take initiative in learning the additional nuances such as learning about work permits, and working with schools and guardians.
Kelly shared,

The one thing that just kind of blows my mind is I've had several service providers say I didn't know what to do with **PROMISE**. And it's like, I'm DVR. Think of me as DVR and if you need to know something different, I'll let you know…job development is job development.

Counselors shared perspectives in also having served in a supportive role with many service providers by advising and coaching them how to work with youth. Counselors such as Uma noted,

I think there's also a lot of vendors that were not trained to work with youth, so they don't necessarily understand things like what a work permit is or how that applies, what are the steps of working with a guardian when you have a youth onboard…I'm specifically thinking of job development in that aspect because I feel like it's a little bit better now, but especially when I first started working with a lot of my vendors I was training them about how to get a work permit, how do you work around the school and their scheduling needs, how can you talk to the school about possibly getting work credit as part of this, like sort of this process?

Discussion involved the concept of consumer choice and the need for a sufficient number of knowledgeable and timely providers available statewide. Counselors expressed concern that in some areas of the state there may only be one job development and placement provider available. Kelly framed it as,

And so, in some of my areas their choice is that there is one choice. And so, yes, my heart goes out when there's not a good fit between the service provider and the person needing services, but I don't have much option. And so I pretty much try to do damage control. Like, I had a youth that the service provider basically quit on, only service provider in the area… sometimes just being sad that there isn't a good match but you don't have a choice.

Debbie shared similar reflections related to service provider knowledge and timeliness,

I think lack of job development training, like with our job developers, whether it be working with significant limitations and not really, not being able to go out there and kind of assist in like job [carving] or whatever might need to be done to help with those significant disabilities and what they might be able to do all the way down to taking four to five months to set up a supported employment assessment because they're not able to, you know, get out there and network with employers or use our BSEs appropriately or whatever the case might be or they're just not used to working with youth. I just think job developers in some areas are a huge barrier right now.

Ida shared similar reflections,

In a place like [location], although it looks like we have so many service providers, like there's a solid three I feel comfortable without risking rapport, like honestly it's, the majority, if they're not going to my kind of top three, I'm already damage-controlling before I even send them.

Mellody explained that,

"It's just bad when it doesn't work out and it's not a good fit because you're like, darn, this is your first time around this and you want it to be a great experience but, you know."

Oxana shared a different perspective related to service provider capacity and quality,

I'm lucky in the [geographic area] that I haven't run into a lot of these issues with job developers. And I mean, a lot of it is that we have so many choices and, you know, we're narrowing those choices a little bit for the families to work with providers who are pretty knowledgeable about this stuff, but I don't feel like we've had to really go in and train providers on how to work with youth or the work permit process or how to work with the schools in general. There's been a couple here or there, but for the most part everyone here's been pretty onboard with jumping in and working well with the students.

However, both counselors asserting satisfaction and those less satisfied expressed that they are careful about which vendors' they refer youth and families to. They take care in educating youth and families about the option to change providers, when possible, if they are dissatisfied with their current provider. An emphasis on being in **PROMISE** in partnership with the family and helping to advocate on their behalf was shared. Debbie's comments reflect this point,

One thing that I stress with my consumers is informed choice and I think over the last year I've had three consumers actually change providers because of either, I've had like two supported employment assessments that took four to five months to set up…they ended up both switching. And then another one just didn't mesh well and wanted to change…I'm constantly checking in with them and seeing how they're feeling through the process, I'm constantly checking with providers, say, hey, what's going on here?

Or some of them, I had one provider that just would not, took like an average of two to three weeks to get back to both myself and the family and so that was one of the other issues. So that's one of the things that I do to make sure that the family realizes that we're the partnership is that I stress that informed choice if they are having any kind of struggles with that provider.

Caseload size

The original design of **PROMISE** accounted for smaller, specialized caseloads in anticipation of complex case coordination with this population. However, counselors reflected that as enrollment increased, it became apparent that many family members were also eligible for DVR services. While allowing counselors to truly engage in wrap-around services to the family members of **PROMISE** youth, it also increased caseload size as reflected on by Ida, "Especially

when you add family members that aren't technically on the list so it might look like you have more--… you have 75 because you're working with siblings and parents". Tonja noted a similar situation,

I'm to the point where I feel like a VR counselor again, you know, with the high caseloads.

And Debbie explained that will all the **PROMISE** pieces,

We're probably stretched way beyond the regular VR counselors.

Uma shared additional perspective,

And the reason for it is because of the structure that is **PROMISE** means that each of those cases has youth, families, multiple plans, additional record-keeping needs, additional services that are expected to be, like so there's, so even though it's one case, the workload for that one case is much higher than it is for a standard DVR case. So, it does end up, I don't know if it's really as much of a lower caseload as it is before.

Language

While language barriers did not emerge as a strong theme, it is included here as an issue to consider in meeting the needs of diverse populations. Tonja shared, that,

One of the youth never had any formal education so that youth never learned reading and writing in her native language and now she's in high school… both of these cases because of language are so incredibly challenging because nobody in the family speaks English. it's hard for me to even get the medical information because both youth didn't really have any medical providers in their native country.

Diversity of Needs and Preferences

The diversity exhibited by families was a complex constellation of their resources and experiences. Some families needed more assistance with transportation than did others, some understood the special education or VR resources better than others, and some had crisis situations that required immediate attention before transition-related needs could be addressed. Wilma said,

Every family is different, so some families may be dealing with some crisis and they need some referrals, and [in] that case, I use Wraparound [City Name] to kind of help

> with those kind[s] of, you know, wraparound services that, for services that I can't provide. For example, they can get a mentor, they can get additional support in schools. I like to have my families have that resource.

Earlana provided this example,

> Even though they've signed up for this program, they may know some things about it, but they may not be ready for all the things that we have to offer. So I ask them what it is that they're expecting from PROMISE, what it is they hope to get out of **PROMISE**, and then talk about, based on the feedback that they'd give me what might match what they're looking for at the time.

In Wilma's comment is also an important implication for individualizing for families. Yet, navigating the differences across community level resources can present a challenge. Ursla explained,

> here you get the yes over here and the no over here with the schools, is that we're dealing with the rural area, and the schools are ready for any type of service that can come in that isn't readily available usually in the rural areas, where, you know, you have wraparound services in [City].

In another example recognizing diverse needs, Earlana said,

> So I have families that have been consistently engaged, and have families that have kind of waxed and waned, and that whole idea of kind of staying in the trenches with them and having to make those contacts with those folks that you know consistently are not going to respond, have not responded, that, in the process of doing the 30-day contacts, which we're required to do, kind of not so much, but a little bit takes away from the time that we could spend with those families who are really engaged, and with the families that are having trouble, but you know that, you know, maybe a couple of month ago, you've met with the families, the student, the parent.

Youth and Family Engagement

PROMISE counselors and case coordinators reflected on the importance of reaching out to youth and families rapidly following their enrollment in the program. Counselors shared that a family's readiness and ability to engage in the identified **PROMISE** services involving benefits counseling, soft skills preparation, self-advocacy, financial literacy, and career exploration varied. Families experiencing food and housing insecurity may need assistance addressing these immediate issues first while other families were ready to begin participating in services.

Counselors and case coordinators noted that engagement in **PROMISE** differs from traditional vocational rehabilitation approaches in that it is not a linear process predicated in an assessed readiness to work. Rather, meeting individual and family needs and providing services such as counseling, financial assistance, etc. relevant in a flexible manner is necessary to keep youth and families engaged. Mellody explained,

Using the different methods of like mailing, e-mails, you know, texting, things like that, and not like feeling I'm harassing them, so to speak, you know, just kind of like, hey, just checking in, you know, want to make sure everything is going well and just like recapping back like maybe it was a year ago like our last conversation a year ago and highlighted that like, you know, how's the new school or so-and-so things like that.

Debbie shared her perspective related to engaging youth and families through timely service delivery, action, and follow-through,

I think that rapid engagement and then really focusing on rapport with the family at first, like really getting to kind of know, spending that extra time…I do the IPE fairly soon in the process…I spend extra time on that intake and then I do that IPE fairly soon in the process so that we can get services started right away. And I think just so that they feel like they're important, like they're not just a number in the system and that we're able to kind of get started in the services right away and then getting a good sense of what it is they need.

And further clarified that,

Jumping into those resource team meetings right away so they automatically feel like you are right there, part of what's going on and on the same page with everyone else that's trying to assist them, too. They feel like you're a part of it.

Counselors reflected on the importance of continuing to reach out to youth and families even when they haven't heard back from participants for substantial periods of time. Remaining committed to reaching out in a variety of ways is critical and families may re-engage at any time. Ida stated that,

I think the biggest PROMISE thing for my caseload is the fact that we're not giving up on them, that we're not going to close them. If I was going to close, if I had the regular DVR rules of closing after no contact, I might have 10 people on my caseload honestly. And it varies, you know, I might have families where there's, you know, this five-month, three-month kind of thing where I don't talk to them and then all of a sudden we have great engagement and then

all of a sudden we don't. So it's not like they're not wanting to do anything but they do go through those periods where maybe something's going on. In regular VR, they'd be done.

The need to engage youth and families quickly following enrollment and provide actions and communication was key in developing trust and rapport and assisted in facilitating engagement. Debbie shared her perspective in that,

> **PROMISE** caseloads are long-term and they've got time to work on so many services and really have a chance to be set up for success along with rapid engagement. I think the families really appreciate that we're right there getting things started and going right away and have a chance to build that rapport with the families, too.

Through engagement, counselors noted seeing success when youth become empowered to make their own decisions. They reflected that most of the youth participants have no previous work experience and don't have a concept of what work is. By helping them gain perspective in real-life settings, the youth are excited and become empowered to take the next steps based on their preferences and interest. By supporting this process through ongoing engagement, the counselor serves to facilitate the youth in moving toward future career paths.

Communication

Using communication tools and strategies such as texting, phone calls, and email were identified as critical to engaging with youth and families, with Kelly noting, "My recommendation would be to have all three available". Counselors explained that frequency of communication varies by family and service delivery with more frequent communication necessary to support engagement during the early phases of job development. They estimated spending an average of 15 hours/week communicating directly with consumers and families and noted that additional time is needed to communicate with service providers. Ida shared that phone and text are primary facilitators of communication,

> I think phone and text are the biggest. Not a lot of my families are familiar with e-mails, so I'll ask do you have e-mail, yeah, do you have or do you know how to log in to access it? No. So, there are some that do well, but I think the majority is phone and text.

A specific challenge that counselors and case coordinators noted in relation to phone calls involves full voicemail boxes. While texting can serve as a good communication and engagement tool between counselors and consumers, the need to work with youth and families in understanding that phone skills and voicemail management are also necessary when interacting with employers. Tonja explained that,

My concern with the texting, I have one family that their phones are set up a certain way for their own reasons where the voicemail is full or the other one doesn't have a voicemail. So it's been over a year trying to connect with this family, so I decided to text, and within five minutes she responded. But the kids, it's siblings, they're in job development now, so she's thinking text is the way to go. But now there's this conversation, you have a job developer involved here, you're going to have an employer involved, they're not going to agree to text you all the time.

So, you know, there's another layer to this, especially with this family. For whatever reason, she has all her phones protected. She's going to have to come up with something else if she wants her kids to work. So that's another struggle basically to help her understand that, that's something that's just, you know, the real world. Employers don't text.

Family advocates

Counselors noted optimism about the new family advocate positions that would soon be available to assist in working with families. Given the relatively large caseload size and time constraints involved with travel for many of the counselors, it is anticipated that the family advocates will be available to assist with more frequent and direct contact in following up with families and assisting with engagement. Tonja shared,

I'm anticipating the parent advocates… I'm not quite sure what they are going to do and how well-trained they are going to be, but to use them in some of these examples… help them find this resource, or help them get the birth certificate, or drive them..

However, counselors also expressed some reticence in that they have positive expectations and hope the new family advocates will be able to deliver the necessary supports. Kelly shared,

I have high hopes for the family advocates".

Ida further stated that,

I'm like a little nervous that it's going to turn into like the same kind of situation that we have with service providers where it's like, oh, this is such a great service. Ugh, it doesn't get performed very well. So I'm really hoping that this does, they are trained well, they are going to take a really active role and take some of that resource-finding off of our plates and like [counselor] said being more physically active, take them down to get that Social, that birth certificate. I can explain it to you but it's still kind of confusing, you know, to go with them to do that kind of stuff, so.

Observations

Caseload Size

The original design of **PROMISE** involved reduced, specialty caseloads to account for the additional complexities anticipated in working with this population. However, counselors reported that their **PROMISE** caseloads are just as large as "regular" DVR caseloads, if not higher in some cases, when taking family coordination and plans into account. While this may not have had the intended outcome of providing more counselor time with each participant, it is an interesting point to consider. The unanticipated large caseloads may suggest that **PROMISE** is reaching a historically un-served and marginalized population that is now benefiting by engaging with vocational rehabilitation.

PROMISE is Making a Difference

Counselors expressed unquestionable support for the **PROMISE** program and perspective that they feel it is really making a difference in people's lives. Debbie shared,

> It feels like a lot in regards to what we do, but I think overall **PROMISE** is a really great program and what it's doing for the families is wonderful…overall **PROMISE** is a really great program and I think what we're doing for families is really good.

Uma reflected that,

> I've had more than one family, you know, send me an e-mail, look me straight in the face and said <u>you have changed our lives</u>.

Comments from other counselors noted that it is not uncommon for families to express gratitude for **PROMISE** with tears.

Implications and Recommendations

In conclusion, the following implications and recommendations are based on data gathered through the focus groups and offered in support of the **PROMISE** program. Consideration and adoption of the recommendations may also be useful in effecting options to non-**PROMISE** consumers in alignment with policy and service concerns related to the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

- *Initial technology set up and integration with consumers is involved and IT personnel support is needed.* Integrating technology, specifically iPads or tablets, into consumer plans was designed to improve access to employment-related resources and enhance participation in the research elements of the project. However, given the complexities involved in setting the technology up properly to meet consumer needs, it is recommended that IT personnel (or contracted services) be involved to support families' and counselors' needs with regard to Internet and tablet use. Support with both technology set-up and maintenance is recommended.

- *Extending ongoing tech support beyond the life of the PROMISE project.* It is anticipated that consumer technology support needs will extend beyond the timeframe of the project. It may be helpful for counselors to consider how best to instruct consumers in acquiring access to these resources on an ongoing basis beyond the scope of their work with DVR. This will help support consumers in learning how to seek Wi-Fi access and technology support in preparation for the end of **PROMISE**-supported Internet access and IT assistance (e.g., device vendor locations).

- *PROMISE services are comprehensive, requiring additional logistical planning.* In some cases, utilizing a wrap-around service approach to resource team meetings may be productive. While this approach may be time consuming on the front end, the

collaborative group shares responsibility for goal attainment and outcomes as service implementation moves forward.

- *Relationships are key to service provision.* Set aside time for relationship building with consumers. Use available strategies for developing trust, particularly for parents who themselves may have experienced struggles in school, employment, and possibly court involvement. This includes affording parents the time to express concerns and goals about the future. Aspects of futures mapping and family-centered planning may serve as further resources to consider.

- *Cultural mindfulness related to poverty and disability.* Training counselors and case coordinators to be culturally responsive and sensitive to challenges associated with poverty and other systemic stressors is critical. Traditional modes of communication, linear planning models, and customary engagement strategies may need to be reconsidered in order to effectively serve this population. Additionally, service providers have a range of understanding about the depth of needs of low-income families and youth with a disability (e.g., understanding the challenges of court involvement and juvenile justice). It is recommended that DVR provide leadership in building service-provider capacity in this area as well.

- *Rapid engagement can expedite trust building.* Although counterintuitive, building trust and developing an employment plan does not necessarily need to involve a lengthy process. Rather, developing and implementing the plan quickly, meeting families where they are at, and offering flexible services and steps that support success may be more effective in reinforcing engagement.

- *Increased communication with schools about PROMISE and DVR more generally will facilitate consumer engagement, self-determination, and achievement of integrated competitive employment outcomes.* It is recommended that DVR counselors and managers continue cultivating close working relationships with schools and administrators. This will enhance teachers' awareness of the counselors' presence and their role in classrooms and during IEP meetings. Enhanced communication and transparency will provide the foundation to more effectively serve students with disabilities in identifying, working toward, and achieving their integrated competitive employment goals.

- *Referrals to service providers revealed a range of quality and expertise to work with families with youth with more involved transition needs.* Service providers must be knowledgeable

and prepared to meet the diverse needs of low-income youth with disabilities and their families. Counselors need to be confident that the service providers to which they are referring have the necessary skill sets, timeliness, and communication routines to sustain effective working relationships and engagement with consumers and their families. DVR may opt to consider integrating vendor measures into their comprehensive program evaluation and quality assurance planning.

- *Limited number of service providers or limited choice in service provision should be addressed.* It is recommended that efforts be made to enhance service provider capacity for high quality job development and placement. High quality job developers are in high demand, including those who are prepared to work on consumers' career goals (e.g., living wages, opportunities for advancement, and benefits). Enhancing capacity for high quality customized employment providers is also suggested to meet more complex employment needs with specific individuals.

- *A notable absence of data (qualitative comments) sheds light on a potential gap for promoting postsecondary education as an outcome for students with disabilities and their families.* Expanded preparation for counselors on ways to connect with postsecondary education options is recommended. This includes developing a broader understanding of financial resources that may be available to support a student's goals.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. How do you spend most of your time … working directly with consumers, their families? Employers?
2. What types of communication work best when you are contacting consumers and their families? Phone? Email?
3. How do you make consumers aware of resources?
4. Which of the **PROMISE** features seems to speak most directly to your consumers' needs, strengths and preferences?
5. What is it that you do to help families access resources (e.g., transportation, fill out an application, help navigate the resources out there)?
6. What are some of the strengths and preferences you have seen consumers employ as they seek information and supports?
7. What are some of the barriers you have seen them face?
8. What are some additional resources and strategies you need to better meet consumer demand?

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