**Project E3 Qualitative Impact Review**

**Site Visit August 7th, 2019**

On August 7th, 2019 Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute representatives Terry Donovan and Kyle Walker conducted interviews with staff and major stakeholders of the South Carolina Commission for the Blind (SCCB). SVRI met formally with Interim SCCB Commissioner Elaine Robertson, Interim VR Director Karma Marshall, the Director of the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center for Employment Melissa Young, Instructor for the Blind Loretta Clayton. SVRI had informal discussions with other SCCB staff members including support staff, VR Counseling staff, fiscal staff, and the Director of Human Resources. SVRI staff also met extensively with three representatives from the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina which is the single largest and most active consumer group in the state. SVRI submits the following summary that highlights the SCCB projects and programs that were directly or indirectly influenced by Project E3 activities.

**Community Outreach & Orientation:**

Project E3 has invested in community outreach in the targeted communities of the Pee Dee region and the Midlands region as detailed in the original project proposal. The intent of this investment has been to increase the awareness of SCCB services within the community resulting in increased referrals and improved linkages to potential community partners. SVRI learned that this outreach has anecdotally improved SCCB’s visibility within the community. Discussions with VR Counselors working in the area stated that prior to Project E3 activities their interactions with community partners and other community programs usually started with explaining what SCCB is and what services are provided by the agency. A VR Counselor assigned to the area stated that since the Project E3 outreach activities she experiences less surprise regarding the existence of SCCB and more understanding of the role of SCCB. Further, while unmeasurable by objective statistics, SCCB staff in the regions feel that the agency has received an increase in phone calls, emails, and drop in office visits by people who want to know more about the agency and by community programs wanting to better coordinate on dual consumers. While SVRI was present at SCCB headquarters we witnessed two community partners attending an SCCB staff training event sponsored by Project E3. One attendee was from the Florence-Darlington Technical College and the other from the general VR agency. This form of partner cross-training and relationship building is relatively unheard of within SCCB prior to Project E3. SCCB stated that consumer referrals are increasing in the targeted regions, but not at the level they had hoped. The agency reports that this is due to extreme levels of staff turnover that has directly impacted the targeted communities resulting in vacancies. SCCB believes that if they had had consistent and present staff available, they would have accepted and processed a larger number of applications. SCCB did note that since the inception of Project E3 activities, relationships with specific Community Based Organizations have been established and that these relationships are evolving and developing into collaborative partnerships. SCCB states that the relationships with the American Job Centers (SC Works) in the targeted communities has become a working relationship with the initial development of sharing resources and collaborating on a job club in the area.

**Community Needs & Resource Assessment**

SCCB worked with project E3 to identify barriers to VR participation and employment within the targeted communities. One identified barrier was transportation. The Project E3 activities lead to SCCB identifying several potential community partners that offer transportation for medical appointments and other community needs for other populations. This resulted in SCCB developing written contracts with several transportation providers that enabled consumers to have accessible transportation in the regions. However, SCCB reported that due to the relatively small number of eligible consumers served in the targeted communities and the relatively small funding available through VR to fund consumer transportation, these partners did not feel it was economically viable to continue providing the service to SCCB. SCCB continues to utilize alternative transportation solutions like taxi cabs, Uber and Lyft as well as public options. However, SCCB feels that transportation is still the overarching barrier to service accessibility and employment. Coincidental to the inception of Project E3, SCCB was invited to participate in several regional workforce development projects focused on addressing community needs for “priority populations” which includes the high leverage groups identified in the targeted communities. SCCB believe that this larger systemic change initiative is the only way to truly address the larger issues of regional transportation, employment, education, and social welfare. The effects of WIOA and the requirement of a Unified or Combined State Plan has put SCCB at the table for the first time and blind consumers are now part of the larger discussion.

**VR & CBO Training & Technical Assistance**

Project E3 has provided intensive training and technical assistance to SCCB and several community partners. The following is a summary of the trainings provided and what the agency reports has been established to implement and sustain the strategies:

* *Motivational Interviewing (Group & Individual):*

Project E3 provided 2 days of training to all SCCB VR Counselors and Supervisors. Training included an MI toolkit and materials. SCCB had invited community partners including the general agency to attend, but only SCCB VR staff ended up attending.

**Implementation Results:**  SCCB reported anecdotally that staff use of MI has been “hit-or-miss” because high staff turnover has resulted in training participants taking their skills elsewhere. Of the VR Counselors trained on MI, only a handful remain employed at SCCB. Of those, some report that they have incorporated the philosophical spirit of MI into their existing counseling style, but do not necessarily use the specific techniques. One VR Counselor reports that she uses the techniques and philosophy with specific “types” of consumers, specifically those she feels need extra support to fully engage in rehabilitation activities. While there is no statistical or data to support that MI has improved SCCB VR practices, we did hear from staff that they “feel” that it helps them create more productive and engaged consumer-counselor relationships.

* *Benefits Counseling:*

Project E3 provided a one-day intensive Benefits Counseling training to all SCCB VR Counselors. Prior to this training Project E3 provided technical assistance to SCCB in establishing an in-house Benefits Counselor position by repurposing an existing FTE. This staff member was hired and trained using the Cornell University training program. Project E3 worked with the new Benefits Counselor to integrate the training to VR Counseling staff with her new role. This helped establish VR Counselor’s understanding of the importance of benefits counseling and how essential benefits counseling is for consumers early in the VR process.

**Implementation Results:**  SCCB reported that the training and tools provided by Project E3 were written into a new agency Policy & Procedure Manual that provides guidance to VR Counselors in making referrals for benefits counseling. While numbers were not provided, SCCB reports that the number of referrals for benefits counseling has increased since the training and implementation of sustainability policy. SCCB has also been introduced to the state WIPA grant program and has been utilizing this resource for the first time.

* *Skills to Pay the Bills-Social Skills Training:*

Project E3 provided a one-day social skills training to all SCCB VR Counselors and some instructional staff from the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center for Employment (EBMRCE). Several partners from an NFB of SC program were also in attendance.

**Implementation Results:**  SCCB reported that the curriculum “Skills to Pay the Bills” has been modified and adapted to be used in the standard EBMRCE curriculum. In addition, SCCB reported that “Skills to Pay the Bills” has been incorporated into their Summer Teens program and was incorporated into the new BRIDGE Program that will be highlighted later. In addition, the curriculum has been incorporated in the Career BOOST Program providing Pre-Employment Transition Services to students who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. Career BOOST will be further discussed later. SCCB reports anecdotal evidence that social/soft skills training had previously been identified as a major need for SCCB consumers. The toolkits and implementation of the curriculum has improved SCCB perceptions of consumer employment readiness. While there is as of yet no data to establish that this has resulted in increased employment outcomes, SCCB staff believe it has and that it has aided in employment retention.

* *Basic Financial Literacy (Your Money, Your Goals):*

Project E3 provided Basic Financial Literacy training to all SCCB VR Counselors and several EBMRCE instructors.

**Implementation Results:**  SCCB VR Counseling staff reported that they have incorporated and adapted several concepts and tools brought by Project E3 to their individualized counseling sessions. However, the biggest implementation impact appears to have occurred when SCCB decided to formally incorporate the “Your Money, Your Goals” curriculum into the formal class schedules at the EBMRCE. SCCB invested in sending an existing instructor to a “train the trainer” on the curriculum provided by SC Legal Aid. Through this community partnership with Legal Aid SCCB has gained access to support and a referral source for legal and financial concerns. SCCB began providing this curriculum in January 2018. SCCB has evolved and modified the curriculum to meet the individualized needs of each consumer. SCCB developed a pre-assessment to determine each consumer’s basic financial literacy and then tailors the “Your Money, Your Goals” to focus on consumer needs. SCCB reports that consumers who have work history tend to be more fully engaged and participatory in the classes. SCCB reports that consumers with payee’s, legal guardians, or who have no work history at all tend to struggle to engage fully in the curriculum. SCCB has been asked to provide hard and Braille copies of the curriculum by nearly all consumers who have attended the training. While there is no data to support the anecdotal reports, SCCB feels that the implementation of this curriculum is essential for consumer job readiness.

* *Job Club Curriculum Training:*

Project E3 Provided Job Club training to all SCCB VR Counselors, Supervisors, Job Placement Specialists, and several EBMRCE staff.

**Implementation Results:** Following this training, SCCB established the BRIDGE Program (Building Readiness for Individualized Development of Gainful Employment). The BRIDGE program was designed to incorporate Job Club techniques and structures, soft skills training and Skills to Pay the Bills social skills training, and pre-apprenticeship to registered apprenticeship training activities. The goal of the BRIDGE is to prepare consumers who have completed blindness skills training at the EBMRCE to engage in a registered apprenticeship program leading to competitive gainful employment. The BRIDGE Program repurposed an existing position and created an initial cohort of 6 consumers. These consumers were provided a multiple week job readiness social and soft skills training at the EBMRCE where they practiced interpersonal communication skills, prepared for interviews, attended and participated in Job Club activities, talked to employers regarding employer expectations, etc. Of the initial 6 consumers, 1 withdrew from the program due to personal life issues. Of the 5 consumers who graduated from the program, 1 is currently engaged in a registered apprenticeship (SCCB’s first ever), 2 were offered and accepted jobs, and 1 was offered a job but declined for personal reasons. This means that 4 of the 5 graduates either got a job, apprenticeship, or had a job offer. SCCB is delighted with this result and is currently engaged in planning for a second cohort to begin in September 2019. The initial cohort included consumers who were very long term SCCB participants who did not have reasonable expectations of successful employment and had for the most part did not have a history of successful employment. One participant/consumer who finished the program told SVRI staff that this program was “a game changer for me.” And that the BRIDGE Program and job club activities helped him self-evaluate and “realize what I had been doing wrong that made me not get the job.” SVRI also learned that VR Counselors and partners at SC Works (AJC) in the Pee Dee Region are currently designing a job club in the region that will begin in October.

* *Self-Employment or Home-Based Business Development Training:*

Project E3 provided technical assistance to SCCB program staff in the development of SCCB’s first self-employment policy and procedure. SCCB published a new Self-Employment chapter in the Policy & Procedure Manual that also included a “Self-Employment Toolkit” designed to walk consumers and counselors through the process of exploring and developing self-employment plans. Project E3 then provided a full day training to all SCCB VR Counseling staff and Supervisors using the SCCB policy and toolkit.

**Implementation Results:** SCCB reports that they have engaged in 3 self-employment cases with consumes since the inception of the new policy, procedure, and toolkit. Of those, 2 new self-employment plans were developed, and 1 consumer is in the process. An SCCB VR Counselor reported to SVRI that they finally feel there is institutional support for VR Counselors who want to help consumers explore self-employment as an option. This staff member stated that they feel more confident when the topic is brought up and that they feel the toolkit is an essential part of why they feel confident exploring self-employment. Another VR Counselors stated that while she has never had a self-employment case, “I would not feel reluctant to talk about it now like I did before.”

**Comprehensive Support Systems Capacity-Building**

Influenced by multiple factors including participation in Project E3 and the new WIOA requirements, SCCB has become an active participant in several statewide and regional partnership initiatives to address the systemic capacity building to address the needs of the targeted communities. SCCB has been invited to be a member of the Priority Population Council, the Transportation Committee, and several other State Workforce Development Board collaborative projects designed to build capacity at the state and regional level. This is a very important development as the barriers facing people who are blind and visually impaired have not previously been a topic of these councils. SCCB has also become an essential partner in the Employment First Initiative, the Employment of People with Disabilities Committee, and the Transition Alliance of South Carolina. SCCB has been involved in helping address systemic barriers and capacity building within these councils as a direct result of Project E3 technical assistance. Also, as a result of the technical assistance and community outreach performed by Project E3, SCCB has become a more involved voice at meetings locally between community-based service organizations seeking to build capacity to meet community needs. While there is no formal objective data to support the claim, SCCB staff are convinced that the agency has been more actively sought out to represent the voice of consumer needs on these and other coordinating councils.

**Employment Opportunities Expansion**

The following SCCB initiatives were either influenced by, provided technical assistance by, or grew from SCCB participation in Project E3 activities:

* Career BOOST (Building Occupational Opportunities for Students in Transition)

Career BOOST was started as a partnership between the SCCB, South Carolina Public Schools, LEA’s, South Carolina’s Independent Living Centers (IL), and the NFB of SC. The program funds the provision of Self-Advocacy Training, Career Exploration Counseling, College and Post-Secondary Education Training Exploration, Work Readiness Training (Soft Skills), and Work Based Learning Experiences to students who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. The program was started in 2017 and served 896 students state-wide. In 2018 the program served 1,593 students state-wide. In 2019 the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD) made the decision to engage as a partner in this Pre-ETS program. SCVRD and SCCB did not have a history of engaging in collaborative partnerships of this scope or magnitude. During 2018 both agencies issued a joint request for proposal (RFP) to officially make Career BOOST a joint program and extend the program’s life cycle to 2024. This program was influenced by Project E3 through technical assistance and through incorporation of several job club, soft and social skills curriculum, and other elements. SCCB and SCVRD stated that they believe this program will prepare transition aged youth to be more fully career ready upon graduation and more engaged in VR services leading to competitive integrated employment.

* Student Internship Program (SIP) & SIP Jr.

SCCB has been managing the Student Internship Program or SIP for over 10 years. This program is designed to provide rising college juniors and seniors with a paid summer internship in their field of study. The program has been highly successful over the years and has resulted in employment for participants at a high rate. Following participation in the Project E3, SCCB created SIP Jr. SIP Jr. brings transition aged students to the EBMRC for a 4 to 6-week summer program that includes a paid summer work experience with evening job club and social/soft skills activities. SCCB was also able to incorporate basic financial literacy skills training into this most recent summer internship program by designing and coordinating a “Game of Life” an experiential participatory board game immersion activity that used some of the concepts from “Skills to Pay the Bills” and the “Your Money, Your Goals” curriculum. SCCB staff expressed their perception that the SIP Jr. paid work-based learning activity will have a long-term impact on the employment of these students.

* GED Prep and Testing Program at EBMRCE

SCCB and Project E3 recognized that obtaining a GED within South Carolina’s Adult Education System was difficult due to the lack of accessible training and testing, and due to a lack of understanding of the needs of people who are blind and visually impaired. SCCB contracted with Richland 1 School District Adult Education to bring GED preparation instruction and testing to the EBMRCE. At present only 1 SCCB student is engaged in this program, but SCCB reports that the lessons learned by SCCB and Richland 1 Adult Education has been profound and will be shared across the state to help other Adult Education centers at the local level become more accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. SCCB is partnering to provide technical assistance to the adult ed system. SCCB believes this will greatly enable consumers to engage in post-secondary education and engage in employment and careers.

**Notes on Collaborative Partnerships**

Prior to Project E3, the level and nature of collaborative partnerships between other state agencies, CBO’s, and consumer groups were very limited. Services were heavily siloed, and collaboration was limited to ensuring that people were referred to the other organization. Braiding and blending of services was not practiced and was not perceived as essential for collaboration. The following are highly significant changes in collaborative partnerships that were identified by SCCB:

* **NFB of SC:** Prior to the Project E3 and other SCCB initiatives the relationship between the state’s largest consumer group and the agency was best described as “adversarial.” Following the technical assistance and other supports of Project E3, SCCB recognized that the NFB of SC was a potential partner in building capacity for community-based services. Since Project E3 inception, SCCB has created the Career BOOST program with the NFB of SC to provide Pre-ETS to transition aged students. Additionally, the NFB of SC and SCCB have created JAWS, AT, Microsoft Office, and other vocational training programs that are funded by SCCB for SCCB VR consumers but provided in classes or virtually by qualified NFB of SC staff. Currently the NFB of SC has been in discussions with SCCB to start an Individualized Placement and Supports (IPS) services model, and Supported Employment (SE) capacity. It is apparent that the NFB of SC has slowly emerged as SCCB’s first Community Rehabilitation Program partner.
* **SCVRD:** Prior to Project E3 there was a partnership between SCCB and SCVRD that included communication and mutual technical assistance, but as recognized in numerous RSA monitoring reports and Statewide Needs Assessments, there was no real collaboration between the agencies at the level of the individual consumer. There was no evidence of braiding or blending services or co-serving consumers with open cases in both agencies. SVRI learned during this site visit that the relationship between the two agencies has greatly improved from the perspective of SCCB. New leadership in both agencies, the influence of WIOA and the Unified State Plan, and the influence of Project E3 technical assistance has resulted in:
  + Sharing of Resources & Communication: An MOU has now been established and a process has been put in place for SCCB to refer eligible consumers to SCVRD programs such as the substance abuse treatment programs, the stroke recovery program, physical and occupational therapy, among others. SCCB has had student consumers invited to participate in SCVRD student programs. SCVRD and SCCB have cross trained staff.
  + Career BOOST: SCVRD has now joined SCCB in the management and administration of the Career BOOST Pre-ETS program. This is the first collaboration and jointly run program between the two agencies that SCCB staff are aware of.
* **Independent Living Centers:** Prior to the activities listed in this report, SCCB had little to no interactions with South Carolina’s Independent Living Centers. SCCB and IL Centers are now partners and collaborators on several fronts including providing Pre-ETS services, participating in joint conferences and programs, sitting on coordinating councils, sharing staff training, and working together to create systems change and capacity building.

**Conclusions**

Based on interviews of SCCB staff, consumer groups, and other informed individuals, the following conclusions can be stated as representing the anecdotal impacts of Project E3 activities on the SCCB.

Project E3 appears to have:

* + Impacted the visibility of SCCB within the targeted communities.
  + More fully integrated SCCB as a visible partner within the local workforce development system.
  + Made SCCB more comfortable and competent in establishing linkages and collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations.
  + Built meaningful and impactful capacities within SCCB staff.
  + Changed conversations, changed expectations, and raised the awareness of SCCB staff and partners around meeting the needs of individuals in the HLG/Targeted Community.
  + Lead to Policy, Procedure, and Toolkit development within SCCB.
  + Lead to the realignment of human resources to create new processes and programs.
  + Established sustainable evidence-based practices.
  + Established the environment where true collaborative partnerships are evolving between agencies.