

Benefits Counseling Conference Call

February 22, 2007

Discussion Leader – Amy Porter

After the success of the November meeting, we have convened our first official MIG-RATS workgroup conference call. November's meeting identified areas in which states would be interested in participating in BC research. Two areas were 1) BC research design/measurable outcomes and 2) development of BC fidelity measures. The call offered presentations of specific examples of research already occurring in these two areas. The group is interested in continuing this discussion with a future conference call, as captured in next steps.

1. Measurable Outcomes and Research Design:

a. Vermont Study: Tim Tremblay

Related article: Tremblay, T; Xie, H; Smith, J; Drake, R. (2004). "The Impact of Specialized Benefits Counseling Services on Social Security Administration Beneficiaries in Vermont". *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 70(2):5-11.

Quantitative outcome evaluations of benefits counseling services' effectiveness have been minimal or lacking.

Tim Tremblay presented information on the above article, summarized as follows:

- Outcomes Measured
 - Employment
 - Earnings
 - Benefits utilization (cash or health care)
- Purpose of the study
 - To evaluate Vermont's specialized BC on SSA disability beneficiaries served by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Target population
 - SSA disability beneficiaries aged 16-60 (SSI, SSDI, or dual eligibles)
- Treatment and comparison groups
 - 1) Treatment = VR consumers who received specialized BC (n=672)
 - 2) Comparison = concurrent participants in the VR system without BC (n=672)
 - 3) Comparison = historical participants in the VR system without BC (n=672)
- BC intervention
 - Specialized staff provide individualized BC services to SSI or SSDI beneficiaries
 - Components included benefits screening, advisement, and management
- Method (quasi-experimental design)
 - Pair-wise matching using 5 variables:
 - I. experience as VR consumer
 - II. experience as SSA disabled beneficiary while VR consumer
 - III. primary VR disability of record (e.g., physical, mental, developmental, etc.)
 - IV. start date of VR services
 - V. maturation in the VR service system
 - Mixed effect linear model to study differences in earnings outcomes

- Tracked average earnings using UI wage data (through global data sharing agreement between the Vermont’s VR Agency and Department of Labor)
 - Because of rolling enrollment in the benefits counseling intervention, UI wage data were collected for all beneficiaries two years before and after the program, and enrollment dates were aligned
 - Earnings data were converted into an all-or-nothing employment record for each employee (if more than \$1 earned, employed), as well as an employment earnings rate for the whole population
- Findings
 - All three groups showed improved earnings over time
 - Specialized BC recipients showed significantly greater earnings over time than the two comparison groups
 - No significant change in SSA benefits utilization for BC recipients
 - Limitations
 - Matched samples cannot rule out self-selection bias
 - Vermont’s UI records do not include all earnings (self-employed)

b. MPR Summary of Findings from NY and OK: Debbie Peikes

As part of the SPI (State Partnership Initiative) study on employment outcomes for its SSI and SSDI beneficiaries with disabilities, the SSA wanted to have a common approach to evaluating the impact of BC interventions across states. Rather than directly promoting work, BC aims to provide a better understanding of how working will affect the benefits they receive from public programs, food stamps, public housing, transportation assistance, and Medicaid and Medicare.

- Outcomes Measured
 - Employment
 - Earnings
- Purpose of the study
 - To compare findings based on randomized design (treatment vs. control groups) vs. Propensity Score Matching (comparison groups) and assess the impact of BC interventions on employment and earnings outcomes
- Target population
 - (NY): SSI beneficiaries with mental illness living in NYC or Buffalo
 - (OK): SSI beneficiaries with mental illness living in northern Oklahoma City, Muskogee, Payne or Tulsa, and not employed at randomization.
- Treatment and comparison groups
 - Intervention group had access to BC services.
 - Control group received usual package of services and supports in community.
- BC intervention components
 - (NY) After signing a consent form, individuals attended a required BC session about Section 1619 work incentives. However, the hours of project services provided in the session were not documented. Thus, service intensity is unknown.

- (OK) Participants given BC services and a voucher for job services or case management. Vouchers were used for 4 hours of services per person per month.
- Method (Randomized Experimental Design)
 - Three states implemented their BC programs using an experimental design (randomization). Only NY and OK had sufficient sample sizes for the analysis.
 - For states that did not employ experimental design, Mathematica use Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to match participants on multiple characteristics.
 - PSM results were then compared to the results of the experimental design states
- Findings
 - Despite passing all statistical tests with flying colors, the PSM results suggested the exact opposite conclusions from results in the experimental design states.
 - (NY): BC intervention without employment services had no significant effect on employment, and a significant, negative effect on earnings.
 - (NY): BC intervention plus employment services substantially increased the proportion of participants who worked, but had no effect on earnings.
 - (OK): BC intervention had a positive but insignificant effect on the proportion of participants who worked, but no effect on earnings.
 - Suggests the importance of incorporating experimental design into all benefits counseling studies in places where the BC cannot be offered to everyone.

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2. Fidelity Measures :

a. Wisconsin's Preliminary Attempt: Barry Delin and Anne Reither

Few studies have been done on BC fidelity measures, which would indicate the extent to which programs or states have similar funding levels, variable measurement, etc. Wisconsin began work in this area but made several compromises along the way that resulted in a product fairly far-removed from a fidelity measure.

Currently, BC is occurring in many different contexts, with different funding sources, and different types of organizations providing counseling. Fidelity measures could be developed to measure the extent to which BC is comparable.

- Historical context:
 - Wisconsin's benefits counseling program was modeled on the 1999 SPI project.
 - One agency developed the model of benefits planning and vocational training, and trained other agencies to execute that exact protocol.
 - Fidelity to the training agency's protocol is important in BC, as well as in areas like psychiatric treatment, especially the community component.
- Purpose of WI's study
 - To define key elements of the BC service model as developed by the training agency, including written beneficiary analysis, types of information covered in BC, counselors' responsiveness to questions.
 - To develop fidelity measures that would evaluate the extent to which the BC delivery agencies deviate from the training agency's protocol as well as from one

another. Fidelity measures should be comprehensive of both quality and consistency of the benefits counseling, including the exclusion of key elements or the inclusion of superfluous elements.

- To evaluate the reliability of fidelity measures developed.
- Intended Method
 - WI began by having experts from the training and technical assistance agency identify the key facets of BC.
 - Multiple items were planned to measure each of the facets, both in terms of the quality of application as well as the completeness/consistency of application
 - Behaviorally-anchored responses were planned, which would range from a description of a poor BC approach to an excellent BC approach to each item
 - Data would need to be collected either by 1) Expert analysis of multiple examples of BC at each agency location, 2) Survey/inventory responses completed by the counselors themselves at each agency location, or 3) both
- The Breakdown – collecting complete and accurate data
 - Workload – The WI system offered a reasonably good opportunity to obtain expert ratings of BC at the agencies. However the workload associated with collecting the ratings in multiple instances and time points across the agencies was far beyond the scope of what the trainers were able to contribute. It also compromised their ability to serve in supportive roles to the counselors, who may have avoided contacting the trainers for support if they felt their activities were being scrutinized.
 - Obtaining ratings data directly from counselors was also considered to be of limited utility, since the Ben Specs knew what was expected of them and were likely to inflate ratings to reflect expected rather than actual behaviors.
- Applied Method (the Compromise)
 - Each facet was measured using a single item with a behaviorally-anchored response scale. The response of the counselor was measured as demonstrating a behavior considered high, mid-range, or low in relation to the intended response.
 - Training agency experts completed the short (6 item) scale quarterly for each agency
 - Experts evaluated one or two counselors at each delivery agency, which sometimes resulted in a combined score for the agency across counselors with varying levels of skill.
 - In large part, the fidelity evaluation became a process of rating written reports and interactions from trainers to implementers, not watching interactions of the delivering counselors with consumers.
 - Proficient counselors had very limited contact with trainers, which compromised the trainers ability to rate their work.
 - No good way of ruling out other things that people were doing that could have added to or detracted from core module. Ideally need expert to rate every BC counselor at each agency but actually only measured one or two at each.
- Findings
 - The benefits counselors were expected to follow the general model provided by the training agency. Over time counselors realized the general model was too

comprehensive for many consumers. This necessary fluidity is hard to take into account with fidelity measures.

- Measures for evaluation would have ideally been based on the training itself rather than the written materials for training sessions.
- Investigating the measures took a great deal of work. Each counselor had to be rated with the scale created more than once, either by the training agency or by outside experts. In the former scenario there is a concern about the truthfulness of the evaluation, and in the latter scenario sufficiently knowledgeable experts are required.
- It was difficult to measure what counselors added or subtracted from the core training module that would have enhanced or harmed the counseling received.
- Ideally, every counselor at the delivery agencies would be evaluated by an outside expert to have a good sense of the range of counseling being delivered and the extent of intra-agency fidelity as well as cross-agency fidelity.
- In addition, the *process* of BC would ideally have been evaluated as well as the *content*. The interaction of the counselor and beneficiary is crucial; the beneficiary must be able to understand and trust the counselor. However, this is very difficult to measure.
- The *scope* of information provided to consumers is also important, as some need more information and some less. Fidelity measures would ideally take into account the need for benefits counselors to accurately judge beneficiaries and adjust their presentation accordingly.

3. Wrap Up / Next Steps

- Amy reminded the group that the Benefits Counseling Workgroup is just one workgroup of the MIG-RATS center, which will be launching their website in June. Concrete tools like data sharing agreements will be available on the website.
- Another call on Benefits Counseling will be scheduled in the next month.
- Shay and Allen report will be passed along from California SPI study.
- The workgroup agreed to focus on post-entitlement populations.
- Future potential topics/projects:
 - Listing key measures to building a benefits planning center
 - Gathering a list of tools or approaches that could be used by states for research
 - Strategizing data collection within a state with using a new tool
 - Defining populations for research within the MIG benefits program
 - Developing fidelity measures
 - Designing research into benefits counseling outcomes and requirements for positive outcomes
 - Developing data collection methods for research on the importance of BC intensity and content
 - Designing research to provide information on future resource allocation