

Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) Illinois' Community Research Specialist Monthly Activities Report

Quarter 3 (April-June 2024)

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Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) Illinois Project

Community Research Specialists (CRS) and Their Assigned Agencies

Aletha Alexander:

- Centerstone
- Human Support Services

Sharon Bergfeld:

- Kreider Services
- The Workshop

Kyle Menke:

- Association for Individual Development (AID)
- CTF Illinois

Background/Overview

Each week, the Community Research Specialists (CRSs) record their direct service activities for their two assigned SWTICE partnering agencies into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. They categorize and input their open-ended responses under four distinct columns: activities, events, outcomes, and support provided by the consultants from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) partners. These activity reports are compiled on a quarterly basis. This document represents the report for Quarter 3 of the SWTCIE project, covering the period from April to June 2024.

This report encapsulates the activities of all three CRSs across their collective six assigned agencies during the months of April through June 2024. The report is structured into four sections, each corresponding to one of the CRSs' reporting columns: activities, events, outcomes, and consultant support.

Activities

CRSs were involved in a variety of activities. These include attending and facilitating routine meetings, sharing information and resources with agencies and other stakeholders, participating in SWTCIE events and presentations, sending key emails and correspondence, scheduling important meetings, attending external meetings with individuals who may not be directly involved in SWTCIE, conducting on-site agency visits, and providing other support activities.

Weekly and bi-weekly check-ins with agencies focused on topics such as progress to date, referrals, employment specialist (ES) discovery and job development/placement activities, case reviews for tech support, DRS VR partnership, training or support needs from the UI SWTCIE team, meeting new consultants, and SILFIES media. Regarding information and resources shared with agencies, as a couple examples, CRSs provided details on upcoming Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) webinars, essential elements of customized employment, the DRS virtual training meetings schedule, and an overview of WebCM. CRSs attended various events and presentations, including community of practice meetings, the Association of Rehabilitation, Research, Policy and Education (ARRPE) research symposium, the VRTAC-QE conference, and a SWTCIE presentation for the Arc of Illinois Leadership Summit. CRSs were also responsible for sending key emails and correspondence. Examples include emailing agency staff to arrange tours of potential employment sites, reaching out to key DRS staff to schedule meetings about DRS contracts, introducing agencies to SILFIES Media and their plans for SWTCIE (including scheduling SILFIES Media's on-site visits for recording), and introducing agencies to their newly assigned

VR counselors. CRSs attended meetings with individuals outside of SWTCIE as well. For instance, they met with someone from the Illinois Center for Transition and Work (ICTW) to discuss the school/transition center they are working with and how they can connect with a partner agency, met with the leader of SILFIES Media to plan and discuss the initial rounds of filming, and met with an agency case manager to discuss client SSI applications. CRSs also conducted routine on-site agency visits and provided various other support activities. Examples include sending anonymous surveys to ES and VR counselors for comments, concerns, and questions; reviewing rough edits of client video resumes; attending trainings (such as for SSI benefits); and reminding agency staff to complete their required evaluation activities.

Events

CRSs participated in numerous events, including meetings, symposiums, conferences, site visits, trainings, and various other activities.

CRSs attended and participated in monthly routine meetings with the evaluation team and the broader internal University of Illinois SWTCIE IL staff. They also held meetings with other CRSs to discuss topics such as DRS VR services for high school-aged youth, transition-aged individuals post-high school, and adult VR services. During these internal CRS meetings, they shared information about partnerships between DRS VR and the SWTCIE project, ES training needs, and the role of VCU consultants. CRSs met with agency supervisors to discuss ES activities, reports, delays in VR referrals, and SILFIES media. They held weekly meetings with agency teams and VCU consultants and conducted frequent DRS check-ins. CRSs also met with John Silfies to begin planning for on-site video filming. Additionally, they reached out to external parties, such as someone from IDOT, regarding transportation issues for SWTCIE clients. CRSs made themselves available to meet with ESs to discuss issues such as current caseloads, DRS billing/contracts, mobility issues, and video resumes for clients. For symposiums, conferences, and other gatherings, CRSs attended the annual ICTW symposium, community of practice (COP) events, and the ARRPE and VRTAC-QE symposiums in Madison, Wisconsin. CRSs also participated in numerous agency site visits, which could have been accompanied by VCU consultants, ESs and their clients, Director Patrick, and agency supervisors and CEOs. During these visits, they interacted with SWTCIE participants, met with employer contacts and visited employment sites, provided discovery training, reviewed contract numbers, and reviewed SWTCIE client cases. SSI benefits training for CRSs was also logged as an event. A few miscellaneous activities that CRSs participated in included meeting with clients to offer suggestions on how to enhance their resumes, VCU providing 1:1 meetings with clients to discuss their interests and potential job options, meeting with agencies to discuss further business development, and filming nonverbal participants completing various office tasks to include on their video resumes.

Outcomes

Outcomes reported by CRSs can be grouped into four categories: intangible outcomes, tangible/measurable outcomes, distinctly positive outcomes, and ongoing goals/outcomes.

Intangible outcomes included improved communication and better support for agency teams in identifying and recruiting individuals from their 14C programs to participate in SWTCIE. ESs built rapport with new SWTCIE participants, and members of the Rotary Club learned more about an agency, its mission, and the role of SWTCIE Illinois/UIUC in the project. Connections were made with individuals who would be enrolled with DRS and engaged with SWTCIE. There was also a reported better understanding of SWTCIE clients and how their ESs work with them. Better rapport with ESs was another outcome reported. Additionally, VCU revised its consultation approach based on feedback from one of the agencies, specifically regarding frequency and areas where agencies desired more support.

Tangible/measurable outcomes included one lead ES leaving SWTCIE to return to his previous position, more customers employed in part-time work, and better connections with local businesses. An agency was also provided with steps that a DRS counselor must complete when processing/updating a case in WebCM.

Distinctly positive outcomes emerged from various activities, such as the ICTW symposium, which offered valuable information on CIE/SEP and customized employment. Speakers shared knowledge on employer engagement and job development, and CRSs reported gaining a lot of useful information. On-site agency visits were also reported to be very successful.

Ongoing goals and outcomes included opening the door for future meetings with DRS office supervisors to express concerns, ongoing consultant support, assisting agencies in figuring out contract amendment requirements, beginning conversations about how video resumes should be developed, edited, and used, gathering and cataloging client SSI history and other current issues, and learning miscellaneous things like whether VR would be liable for clients participating in situation assessments in the community.

There were a few items coded as pending or “upcoming.” These included agencies requesting that PMS allow SWTICE ESs to provide job coaching support to non-SWTCIE participants to avoid job loss, working with PMs to find a solution to DRS referral delays, planning for site visits and discussing which participant(s) might be involved in the first SILFIE video, drafting an email for a client to send to a volunteer coordinator, following up with clients on physicals and vaccination status, seeking clarification on DRS billing, discussing the possibility of Spanish marketing materials for SWTICE, and working with clients to help them better understand and revise their work schedules.

Consultant Support

The following content summarizes the support that VCU consultants have provided to the CRSs' respective agencies: VCU consultants provide direct assistance to SWTCIE agencies by attending weekly meetings and check-ins, reviewing cases, discussing discovery activities, providing information and suggestions, giving examples, role-playing, and always being available when needed. They assist with developing client video resumes and writing traditional physical resumes. VCU offers extensive help with business engagement, including guidance on conducting business tours, gathering information about businesses and job opportunities, building long-term relationships with businesses, and finding job opportunities through community connections and non-SWTCIE ESs. They provide client support by promoting disability self-awareness, addressing clients who deny or are unaware of their disabilities, sharing applications for non-verbal clients, suggesting suitable jobs, considering volunteer work placements, and emphasizing the benefits of observing clients at work and modeling at job sites. During COPs and other meetings, VCU provides training on different topics like developing job seeker profiles and effective use of situational assessments. They also help with miscellaneous topics like financial literacy and handling labor union situations where work schedules of less than 40 hours a week may be inflexible. Additionally, VCU supports SWTCIE participants by offering benefits education, guidance on next steps for clients whose initial employment did not work out, and strategies for staying on task, transitioning to new tasks, and practicing proper social etiquette. They also provide expert guidance to ESs on time and caseload management.