

Are Workshops Effective In Rehabilitation?

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Society's attitude toward physical and mental disabilities has varied considerably over the centuries and among cultures. Survival of the fittest and man's obsession with "normalcy" have usually predominated. Only those handicapped people who were the most hardy, wise, forceful, clever, or who had a combination of such attributes were able to break through the flimsy but tightly woven "rejection curtain" fashioned by societies throughout the ages.

Survival of the tribe, superstition, fear of becoming similarly afflicted, and a host of other conditions and reasons have been suggested by our ancestors as causes for their behavior.

With the aid of the psychosocial sciences, shame, guilt, embarrassment (hide them in the closet syndrome), and a sprinkling of other psychological conditions have been cited as prime explanations for diverting the handicapped from the cultural and social mainstream.

More recently, society's "rejection curtain", vis-a-vis the handicapped, has been drawn somewhat more subtly, but it still exists. Psychologists can now breathe a temporary sigh of relief because it is now the economist's turn to explain the rejection phenomenon.

A few examples of how the present day economy affects our handicapped population gives credence to this contention. Special education classes and buses for the handicapped have been eliminated in certain parts of our country because of budget cuts since programs for "nor-

mals" come first. Yet handicapped children need more intensified and quality education to compete with their peers and, therefore, should receive priority over the non-handicapped. Elevators planned for subway stations to permit access by the handicapped and the aged (or very small children) are eliminated because of cost; ramps planned for buildings are overlooked in the actual construction in order to economize; industry does not build better wheelchairs or improve and develop new assistive devices because the margin of profit is thin; some airlines refuse handicapped passengers, because of insurance (suits) problems; and so on and on.

In terms of work, however, the handicapped have fared better in recent years than they have in the past. History had a few handicapped notables such as Beethoven in music, who became deaf in later years but never lost his job (He was self-employed.), or Napoleon in war who was considered an epileptic (He wouldn't have been accepted in recent wars because epileptics are usually disqualified.). In general, however, severely handicapped people of the past survived as beggars or thieves, unless they were extraordinarily gifted.

The sheltered workshop made its debut almost 140 years ago, but it has only been during the past 15 years that a major proliferation of these facilities has begun to make an impact on the severely handicapped in terms of their adjustment, training, employment, and place-

ment in the competitive labor market. A recent study of sheltered workshops provides us with some insights on the societal "rejection curtain" that is drawn in the employment of the handicapped. But the study also gives us cause for hope.

Sheltered Workshop Study

The Sheltered Workshop Study was mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and conducted by Grencleigh Associates of New York City under a contract awarded by RSA. Basic objectives were to identify a analyze the roles of sheltered workshops in the community; determine the number of sheltered workshop and their client population; and obtain data on the attitudes of the community at large concerning workshops, as well as the perceptions of handicapped people with respect to workshops.

According to the study, the best estimate of the total number of workshops and work activities centers in this country is approximately 3,000. It is difficult to arrive at a precise count because of the different definitions that exist of what constitutes a sheltered workshop. The above estimate takes into account the definition under Section 14 of the Fair Labor Standards Act in which 2,766 workshops were certificated by the Department of Labor by the end of the second quarter of Fiscal Year 1975, and an estimated 300 other work settings that could be classified as workshops or work activities centers. It is interesting to note that even though the first workshop in this country was allegedly opened in 1838, the workshop movement has experienced most of its growth in the past 15 years.-

From the total estimated number of workshops, including work activities centers, it was found that only

1,700 workshops had the necessary records to provide the information required to conduct the study. Greenleigh Associates randomly selected a sample of 400 workshops from the universe of 1,700, and interviewed clients and workshop staff.

The following national estimates of workshop population, in terms of the total number of clients in the 2,766 Department of Labor certificated workshops, was projected by Greenleigh Associates: Average number of clients served daily, 140,000; average daily caseload, 174,200; total number of clients served annually, 410,000; and number of clients leaving annually, 182,000.

A major objective of this study was to determine whether sheltered workshop are now playing an effective role in the rehabilitation, training, and placement of severely handicapped people. Three roles were specifically identified as most often performed by all workshops, with varying degrees of perceived or actual success.

The first role, that of providing rehabilitation services or problem reduction to individual clients is found to be conducted by most workshops. The degree of success in reducing individual problems was considered to be relatively high in comparison with the other two roles.

A second role is that of assisting in the placement of clients in competitive employment. The majority of clients perceive this role as primary. However, the rate of success in accomplishing this objective was relatively lower than expected. An estimated 10 percent of workshop clients for the universe of 2,766 workshops in this country are placed each year in competitive industry.

A third role is that of providing long term remunerative employment. The study concluded that this was probably the least successful role even though an estimated 100,000 handicapped people, out of a projected total average daily attendance for all workshops of 140,000 clients, were engaged in this type of extended employment.

A fourth role, not specifically mentioned in the study but implied throughout the report, can be considered to be that of workshops serving as socialization information and recreation centers for handicapped people who have very limited access to the rest of the community in which they reside.

The roles of workshops vary considerably with each facility. It becomes evident that workshops frequently attempt to combine all the cited roles; this tends to be self-defeating and to dilute efforts in effectively pursuing one or more of the roles. This confusion is probably exacerbated by a complex funding structure upon which a workshop must rely to carry-out its various roles. For example, workshops for the blind appeared to have the greatest success in the extended employment role, because, in general, this goal is clearly established and such services as vocational evaluation and pre-vocational training are provided prior to a client's entrance into the workshop. Thus, a blind person is usually assigned to a workshop when it is determined that, at a given point, this is the highest level of vocational potential for that person.

Findings in the Greenleigh Study most directly related to the problems of attitudes concerning workshops were classified as follows: Client perceptions of services provided and expectations: attitude of labor; perceptions of state vocational rehabili-

tation agency staffs: and perceptions of industry.

Field representatives interviewed 2,140 handicapped people in the 400 workshop sample which was geographically distributed throughout the United States. Respondents included 339 persons with visual impairments, 118 with orthopedic disabilities, 66 diagnosed as having cerebral palsy, 386 as having mental or emotional disorders, and 942 classified as mentally retarded. The rest were persons with respiratory disorders, drug addiction problems, and other disabilities.

The Client's Perception

In general, handicapped people felt that they were quite satisfied with their experiences in sheltered workshops. Only 8 percent responded that they were not satisfied with overall services provided. When asked specifically about evaluation services, 92 percent stated that they were satisfied with the quality of evaluation provided.

In response to the question about having received manuals on workshop policies and practices, 54 percent answered affirmatively indicating that a large number had never received such policy materials. Even though the overwhelming majority (91 percent) indicated that rules and regulations were enforced fairly by the staff, 81 percent felt that they were not participating in the development of workshop policies, rules, and regulations. Also, 80 percent indicated that they knew of no formal or informal organization of handicapped workers in their workshop.

In terms of participating in the development of their own service or program needs while in the workshop, only 34 percent said that they had been so involved. A total of 71

percent of the 1,697 handicapped persons answering the question on why they were being trained, reported that their training was in preparation for unsheltered employment in the open labor market. Also, the majority of 1,464 respondents to the question of when they would be placed outside the workshop, indicated that this would be accomplished within 1 year-

Findings from workshop and handicapped client records, however, seem to contradict these perceptions. First of all, only 10 percent of the handicapped people in the 400 workshops sampled were placed during the year of this study. Also, 29 percent of the workshop clients were self-terminated with no apparent reason for their leaving, such as employment elsewhere.

The study also indicated that the average length of stay in the workshop for terminated clients was 2.1 years. Besides self-termination, handicapped people left workshops because their training program was completed or they left for what was referred to as psychosocial reasons. Only 10 percent left because their sponsorship had terminated.

An analysis of fringe benefits indicates that 62 percent of the 400 workshops sampled covered only their staffs with unemployment compensation, and 68 percent include only staff in their sick leave policies.

In summary, there seems to be an indication that the workshop management and handicapped clients perceive the workshop as a temporary training facility which will lead to outside employment in the immediate future. Yet, the rate of placement in the outside labor market is extremely low (about 10 percent) and the average length of stay in the workshop is considerably beyond the 1 year anticipated by the client.

It can be assumed that the employment role of the workshop itself is far more significant than was previously realized and possibly this role should be pursued more realistically for certain persons with unusually severe disabilities. In such cases, however, the handicapped person should probably become a full fledged employee, with all the rights and privileges that accompany this role.

Attitude of Labor

Field representatives of Greenleigh Associates interviewed 79 representatives of local organized labor to determine their perception of sheltered workshops.

Even though 90 percent of the labor respondents indicated that labor looks favorably upon local industry having contracts from sheltered workshops, nearly one-half of the favorable volunteered that in their opinion there is no competition between organized labor and sheltered workshops. This was amplified by several respondents who said that workshops tend to supplement the work performed by organized labor, by carrying out low-skilled jobs that are not wanted by union workers. Study findings corroborated the fact that the work performed in the majority of sheltered workshops is low-skilled, menial, and generally undesirable from the, standpoint of most non-handicapped as well as more qualified handicapped workers.

In general, labor representatives did not consider handicapped people as workers in the usual sense, while they were in the sheltered workshop. Labor representatives were overwhelmingly favorable to workshops (only 4 percent felt that the shops constituted a threat) as long as they continued to be noncompetitive with union jobs.

Perception of Industry

The 136 local industry representatives who participated in the Greenleigh study generally considered the subcontract work performed by sheltered workshops as satisfactory, and 68 percent of the 128 respondents to this particular question reported high satisfaction and excellent quality of work performed by the workshops.

When asked what alternatives there might be to sheltered workshops, 65 percent of the 116 respondents stated that they knew of no alternative programs. Those who did mention alternatives, suggested training in high schools, technical schools, colleges, and universities. Only 3 percent suggested that training could be done in a competitive employment environment.

State VR Agency Staff

Interviews were conducted on-site in 20 state VR agencies, and the questionnaires were mailed out to 29 additional states. Responses were quite consistent in that they indicated the role of sheltered workshops to be one of evaluation, adjustment, and training.

Most states indicated that the workshop should also be considered as a place of permanent employment, apparently for certain persons with very severe disabilities. Only eight states considered job placement as a major workshop role.

In general, state vocational rehabilitation agencies felt that workshops fulfilled their roles of evaluation and adjustment fairly well, but failed in the goal of job placement. Data from the study findings fully agreed with their perception on placement.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Greenleigh study findings indicate that there is a panoply of varying perceptual conceptions concerning the role of sheltered workshops, and, specifically where and how handicapped individuals fit into this division of viewpoints. Most sheltered workshops view themselves as evaluation and adjustment training facilities. The handicapped client has an expectation of being trained for a relatively short duration and then being placed into the competitive labor market. Industry, however, is apparently not aware that workshop clientele will eventually be looking to it for permanent work.

Labor is most favorable to workshops, but only as far as they continue to provide work that is noncompetitive with union jobs. The profile that emerges is one of confusion with respect to the roles of workshops, and a subtle but recognizable paternalistic attitude from the community sector which generally regards the handicapped as people who need specialized, permanent help.

Industry, labor, and other segments of the society appear to be willing to support such programs, either directly or indirectly, but, apparently, they are not ready to consider themselves as an integral part of the system. For this reason, it is crucial that the workshops and work activities centers continue to provide their present program and employment services and even expand upon them to meet the present needs of the severely handicapped. The primary objective of integrating the severely handicapped into the working community, however, should continue to be the mainstay of all efforts and the guiding principle in developing an overall action plan.



Workshops should clearly identify their roles, be it employment, work adjustment, training, evaluation, and, especially, outside placement, or a combination of these. They should work toward the achievement of their clarified role in cooperation and coordination with other similar community programs.

Among their many other activities, voluntary organizations and their legions of dedicated volunteers, who have so effectively paved the way for our nation's handicapped, should intensify their efforts in educating all segments of society on the inherent right of the handicapped to full membership in society. The handicapped person's right to work should be a prime educational target on the part of our voluntary organizations.

Government at all levels must also reexamine its perceptions of the

roles of sheltered workshops and encourage a realistic, coordinated community approach to them. Moreover, the affirmative action provisions, mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, must be vigorously implemented, but in a spirit of willing cooperativeness between industry and government.

Handicapped people have the most important role of all, by taking full advantage of existing services, pointing out needs, and by constructively and aggressively involving themselves in community activities that may have an influence on their future.

In spite of the many attitudinal problems that still seem to persist in our historical genes, progress made in recent years by sheltered workshops, voluntary organizations, the state-federal program of vocational rehabilitation, and other sectors of the community is most impressive. Tens of thousands of handicapped people have found respectable jobs, and even though this is only a small beginning, it suggests that a major rent in the "rejection curtain" exists today. With the concerted effort of all segments, the curtain can be torn asunder . . . by tomorrow.

Handicapped people most assuredly have the same rights and privileges of working in a sheltered workshop or in the competitive labor market as non-handicapped people. Every effort should be made to ensure that such rights are honored. Results of this recent sheltered workshop study indicate that sheltered workshops do indeed have a long way to go to meet the employment needs of the severely handicapped, but so does the rest of our society.

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