**Project Closeout – VAIL – “Opportunities Abound” Grant**

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

| Grantee: | Valley Associates for Independent Living, Inc. |
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| Grant Title: | Opportunities Abound: Early Planning for Your Future |
| Project Period: | 10/1/2012 – 9/30/2015 |
| Project Coordinator: | Andrea King VBPD Project Manager: Lynne Talley |
|  | andrea@govail.org lynne.talley@vbpd.virginia.gov  |

**A. Overall Project Goal:** To work with school divisions to begin career exploration and transition planning for students with disabilities as early as elementary and middle schools and to design IEP goals with the ultimate result of self-sufficiency, higher education, and employment.

**B. Program Performance:**

**Objective 1:** Convene a Steering Committee (SC) to provide guidance to the project.]

**Accomplishments**: The Steering Committee for the “Opportunities Abound” grant was formed during Quarter 3. Additional members were added in Quarters 6 and 8 and were reported accordingly. A Google Groups list serve was created for the Steering Committee to receive information concerning the grant and activities conducted as well as to communicate with the project coordinators and/or each other. The following were represented on the grant Steering Committee: the public school system, T-TAC, Community Services Board (CSB), ARC, Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), I’m Determined, parents of students with disabilities, Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), and James Madison University. Moreover, a main steering committee roster with contact information was created for project coordinator use.

**Performance Measures**: Throughout the grant, the project coordinators shared information concerning the grant and activities that they would like to conduct in the schools. Feedback was requested with each posting. Project Coordinators were also a part of a local transition council on which sat several steering committee members. Information regarding the grant was shared face-to-face with these members at the quarterly meetings and feedback was welcomed.

**Demographics**: As previously mentioned, the following were represented on the “Opportunities Abound” steering committee: the public school system, T-TAC, Community Services Board (CSB), ARC, Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), I’m Determined, parents of students with disabilities, Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), and James Madison University. There was a minimum of 13 individuals on the Steering Committee at any given time and the following geographical areas were represented by the individuals on the committee: Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, Waynesboro City, Staunton City, Augusta County, and Highland County.

**Consumer Participation**: Formal Steering Committee participation was low. Although the Google Groups list serve was created to provide a simple, accessible format for individuals to communicate with the project coordinators as well as each other as well as to provide input to grant workshops, it was observed that utilization was minimal at best. VAIL project coordinators also had some face-to-face conversation with steering committee members where activities were supported and interest in grant activities and the expansion of them was verbalized. This input was used in the development of classroom and community workshops. Members of the Steering Committee expressed great appreciation for the transition manual and YouTube videos and members have utilized these in meetings with families, students and other professionals.

**Barriers**: Ongoing feedback from the Steering Committee for the activities that were conducted in the schools on a regular basis was low. The excitement and feedback of the Steering Committee increased with specific projects (i.e. transition manual, workshops, YouTube videos).

**Effective Strategies**: It was easier to get individuals to commit to being a part of the Steering Committee when they knew that required participation would be limited and that they could communicate via email / Google Group. Targeted, one-on-one meetings with members of the Steering Committee were also useful in soliciting feedback for grant activities and planning for workshops.

**Objective 2:** Develop training materials and workshop presentations.

**Accomplishments**: VAIL project coordinators received baseline data from Waynesboro City and Highland County in Quarter 2. Also during this quarter, staff created a survey that explored current trends and practices, attitudes, and areas of training needs for individuals with disabilities. The survey was distributed to parents and teachers in Waynesboro City and Highland County schools. During quarter 3, staff received several responses from families from the aforementioned school districts and a PowerPoint presentation was created on training needs, suggested workshop subjects and materials to address these needs. This was shared with the Steering Committee. During Quarter 8, surveys that explored current trends and practices, attitudes, and areas of training needs for individuals with disabilities in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County were distributed to parents. The obtained results were placed into a PowerPoint presentation which was shared with the Steering Committee and other relevant school personnel. Staff was able to obtain baseline information concerning current policies and practices in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County during Quarter 9. The Project Coordinators used the results from the aforementioned surveys to design activities and workshops that addressed identified needs (i.e. career exploration, job readiness, etc.).

**Performance Measures**: The project coordinator developed a survey for dissemination to parents and teachers, a PowerPoint presentation which addressed training needs identified in the returned surveys and, each semester, a schedule of workshops was created which included both activities in the school and in the community.

**Demographics**: Project Coordinators, Waynesboro City Schools, Highland County Schools, Harrisonburg City Schools, Rockingham County Schools, Steering Committee, families, school personnel.

**Consumer Participation**: The survey responses that were received from families during Quarter 3 identified job planning and career exploration as the top needs in Waynesboro City and Highland County schools. The survey responses received from families in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County identified the following as top needs: how to search for a job, career exploration, and self-determination/advocacy.

**Barriers**: Getting surveys to families was one identified barrier, as staff had to obtain permission from SPED directors (or sometimes higher school personnel) to distribute the survey in the school and then, once permission was granted, staff had to rely on the teachers to get the survey to the parents. This was often done simply by sending home in the students’ backpack. Secondly, the number of survey responses in all school settings was low. This could be attributed to students not giving the surveys to their parents, parents returning the surveys via the student and the student not giving it to the teacher, or simply because parents are busy and did not have the time to complete and return.

**Effective Strategies**: Working with school divisions that are governed by policies and procedures requires a great deal of planning ahead. We found this effective in receiving some feedback; however, our best feedback was from one-on-one conversations with families and students during trainings, workshops and seminars.

**Objective 3:** Develop a schedule of workshops.

**Accomplishments**: At the beginning of each school year, staff worked with teachers in the respective school systems to identify a day and time for VAIL to be present in their classrooms throughout the year. In some schools, VAIL had a weekly presence, in some a bi-monthly presence and in others we were there only once per month. Once a yearly schedule had been identified, VAIL project coordinators worked to create activities related to career exploration, self-advocacy, goal setting, transition, etc.

**Performance Measures**: Over the course of this grant, VAIL was able to complete 195 workshops and reach a total of 264 individuals (students, parents, school personnel, professionals). A total of three programs / policies were created or improved.

**Demographics**: Project Coordinators, Waynesboro City Schools, Harrisonburg City Schools, Rockingham County Schools, Steering Committee, families, students with disabilities, school personnel, community professionals.

**Consumer Participation**: For workshops that were conducted in the community, the feedback was always positive. Parents and other community professionals exhibited a heightened awareness of programs and services available in the community and also expressed their thankfulness for the information presented. When working in the schools, teachers, guidance counselors, principals, transition coordinators and other SPED personnel expressed genuine interest in the workshops that VAIL was completing in the classroom and seemed delighted that their students got the opportunity to be exposed to additional career exploration and self-advocacy activities. The students that VAIL staff worked with developed a connection with VAIL staff and looked forward to scheduled workshops, particularly those students in classrooms where VAIL had a weekly presence. Teachers and guidance counselors expressed disappointment when the grant was not renewed for its final year.

Moreover, it should be noted that, prior to learning of the grant’s ending, VAIL had a renewed effort in Highland County. This school system had a new transition coordinator and conversations were already underway to discuss how VAIL could begin to have a presence in their schools. Since this time (and after the grant’s ending), VAIL staff have already spent an entire day in their classes conducting transition activities with students and will be headed back on November 5 to meet with parents at Parent-Teacher conferences. It should also be noted that VAIL project coordinators had been working with the Director of Pupil Personnel Services in Rockingham County to add another class to grant activities. This class would have been autism specific and would have given staff access to additional students with a developmental disability.

 **Barriers**: VAIL encountered the challenges of navigating the school division’s bureaucracy to gain access to teachers and students. It required a tremendous amount of time of relationship-building throughout all levels of the school systems to make the appropriate connections / develop the necessary relationships to even get schools to sign on to the grant. Even once these contacts were secured and relationships were developed, it also took a significant amount of time to identify teachers that were willing to participate, explain the grant / activities to them and to arrange times that were conducive to staff being in their classrooms to work with the students. Another barrier that the project coordinators encountered was the inability to make contact with the transition coordinator in one of the school divisions which had signed an MOU which prohibited the scheduling of activities in this school system for an entire year.

**Effective Strategies**: After RIL discontinued working with the grant and VAIL needed to secure additional school participation, staff found it extremely helpful to draw on their experience with working with the initial two school systems in identifying the appropriate people to talk to in order to get MOUs signed, how to pique school personnel and teacher interest (i.e. explaining that the activities we would be conducting would be conducive to IEP or VAAP goals, be beneficial in providing new and exciting activities for their students, allow teachers additional time to focus on other tasks, etc.), and activities that could be used and workshops that would be beneficial.

**Objective 4:** Identify participating students with DD and follow for five years.

**Accomplishments**: VAIL project coordinators were able to identify thirteen (13) students to follow for the three year post-grant period.

**Performance Measures**: The goal for this objective, once revised in 2014 after RIL withdrew, was for VAIL to identify 20 students to follow for 5 years. At the close of the grant, VAIL had identified 13.

**Demographics**: Project Coordinators, Waynesboro City Schools, Harrisonburg City Schools, Rockingham County Schools, Steering Committee, families, students with disabilities, school personnel.

**Consumer Participation**: See “Barriers” section below.

**Barriers**: In December 2013, RIL made the decision to withdraw from the grant. One of the goals / expectations that VAIL had in working with RIL was that they would provide the majority of the students needed for follow-along since they have a much larger student population. Therefore, their withdrawal from the grant created a barrier in identifying students to follow, despite the number being decreased from the original 30 down to 20. Moreover, VAIL staff encountered a lack of parent response to requests to allow VAIL to “follow” their students as well as parent apprehension at having their student “followed” for five years. Some parents indicated a lack of time and uncertainty of how long their child would remain in a certain school district.

**Effective Strategies**: One-on-one interactions with parents / families proved to be the most successful method in securing students to be “followed” for five years. Another effective method of identifying students for follow along was going through the teacher, as one teacher agreed to allow us to follow her entire class.

As previously mentioned, staff also had renewed grant interest and participation from Highland County and were in the process of adding an additional classroom in Rockingham County to grant activities. We have confidence that this would have led to more students to follow, thus meeting the goal of 20 students with a developmental disability.

**C. Stories of People with Disabilities:**

During VAIL’s time with the students involved in the VBPD grant, we had many students who began to show initiative in planning for their futures post-school. One student, “D,” at Skyline Middle School in Harrisonburg began enjoying the activities that were being completed in their classrooms on a weekly basis. He began to show excitement when planning for his future. Although all worksheets were returned at the end of the school year, he asked to take worksheets home that focused on planning for his post-school life the day they were completed so that he may refer to them and plan for the future that date. He began asking detailed questions about careers as well as about what resources were available for him when he decided to pursue his dreams after leaving the school system.

Another student, “J,” was fascinated with exploring careers throughout the grant. At first, she was set on the fact that she wanted to be a famous singer but throughout the grant she began making a “fall back” plan where she chose alternative careers to focus on should her singing career not work out. She started showing excitement in planning for her future. We ensured these students knew their resources including VAIL should they need any help with transitioning in the future.

While working with the school systems through the grant, two area schools specifically incorporated the activities and transition planning brought into their classrooms by the grant. One teacher, for a multiple disabilities classroom in HCPS (and then RCPS), worked with us to be sure the planned activities could be incorporated into her classroom in other areas and taken further than the half hour we were able to meet with the class per week. This teacher stated in her final survey that her students had grown throughout the program and the fact that the students were able to communicate with VAIL staff was a “huge” accomplishment for her students, who are mostly non-verbal. Another teacher at EMS (RCPS) asked to make copies of the activities presented in order to include in one student’s portfolio and to be able to use them for other classes she had or may have in the future. Finally, a teacher in WCPS asked that staff leave one of the activities that was completed as part of the grant with her so that she could use it when students had free time and in subsequent years with new students.

Moreover, personnel at the various schools also took time to thank VAIL staff for their hard work and working with their students once notified the grant was coming to an end.

**D. Assessment of Systemic Impact of Grant:**

It is evident that the impact of this grant is tangible in that students began to dream bigger, plan bigger, think of transition and how the next years of middle and high school impact those plans and dreams. Teachers decided to internalize several of the activities and saw their students grow in ways that they had not seen prior to the grant, thus raising their expectations of their students. The workshops that were conducted provided content and contact information that students and families will be able to utilize in subsequent years for future planning. VAIL has laid a strong foundation among students, families and teachers for raising the standard, planning for the future and making connections to the larger community for support.

 Moreover, VAIL was able to establish a wonderful working relationship with school systems that we often do not work directly with on a regular basis. As a result, it is hoped that they will continue to look to VAIL to provide expertise in early transition planning for students with disabilities.

**E. Sustainability Plan:**

VAIL’s participation in the “Opportunities Abound” grant opened many doors. As noted above, several teachers are implementing strategies and activities that VAIL designed and created as part of the grant. The transition manual, a powerful resource to families and transition planners, will continue to be disseminated to students, families and schools and the YouTube videos will remain online for public access. VAIL will continue to provide some ongoing community workshops as well as continue to serve as a resource in the community. Moreover, VAIL will be following through with transition focused workshops in Highland County Schools, as the connection was made and excitement was there prior to learning that the grant would not be renewed.

**F. Future Actions:**

VAIL will continue to serve as a community resource to families. We will continue to look for ways to collaborate with local school systems on early transition planning, community resources and other transition issues. VAIL will also continue to provide transition assistance to students and families so that individuals with disabilities can have IEP goals that better reflect their plans and dreams as well as to ensure that transition planning begins at a much earlier age than what is required by law.