DEP Project Summary: Partnerships for Starting and Scaling Self-Employment among People with Disabilities

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Research Strand: Enhancing Employment

What are we Studying?

This study explores how State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs) can better support people with disabilities to successfully start and sustain self-employment, including entrepreneurship, small business ownership, and gig work.

Why are we Studying this Issue?

Self-employment offers people with disabilities greater autonomy, flexibility, and opportunities for skill development and community engagement. However, only 1.7% of VR cases result in self-employment closures, partly because VR counselors often lack sufficient training and resources to support clients with varying levels of business readiness. Understanding how to effectively support self-employment is particularly important in rural areas where traditional employment options may be limited.

How will we Study this Issue?

This three-phase study will: (1) Conduct interviews with up to 30 VR clients and 30 VR counselors across at least three states to identify barriers, facilitators, and training needs for self-employment; (2) Develop and test two evidence-based toolkits, one for VR clients focusing on business planning and accessibility, and one for VR counselors offering training and support resources; and (3) Conduct a randomized controlled trial with 1,700 participants to evaluate whether the client toolkit improves self-employment readiness, confidence, and business planning behaviors.

How will this Study Impact Disability Employment Policy?

This study will provide evidence-based resources and practical guidance to help VR agencies, counselors, and clients improve self-employment outcomes, informing state and federal policies that support self-employment as a viable career path for people with disabilities.

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