Improving the Business Enterprise Program Experience for Vendors who are Deaf-Blind

What Were We Trying to Learn?

This study explored challenges facing Randolph-Sheppard (R-S) BEP vendors who are deaf-blind and the staff who work with them and solicited suggestions for improvements to address these concerns. Randolph-Sheppard (R-S) BEP vendors own and operate more than 2,300 vending facilities across the country, ranging from vending machine routes to full-service cafeterias. State agencies recruit individuals who are legally blind to work in and manage BEP facilities, but BEP vendors may have other disabilities, such as hearing loss, which require additional accommodations.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

The top challenge mentioned by BEP staff was helping vendors who are deaf-blind communicate effectively. Although most vendors and some staff felt that deaf-blindness did not involve any unique communication issues, others noted that vendors who are deaf-blind:

- Communicate slowly and often need to repeat themselves or ask others to repeat themselves multiple times.
- Communicate indirectly through assistance from interpreters, employees, or family members, increasing the chance that content will get lost in translation.
- Rely on alternative communication methods, such as writing or phone calls, resulting in a lack of face-to-face interaction.

Research Takeaway

Business Enterprise Program (BEP) owners and operators (vendors) who are deaf-blind face some unique challenges. In this study, BEP vendors and staff identified specific challenges, such as communication obstacles and availability of technology, and suggested program improvements to address these concerns.

Among BEP vendors who are deaf-blind, the most commonly cited challenge was a lack of up-to-date technology available to them while on the job.

When asked for suggestions to improve the BEP experience for vendors who are deaf-blind, vendors and staff offered the following feedback:

- Expand access to interpreters by employing more people who know how to interpret or by training existing staff to understand tactile sign language. Individuals serving as interpreters should know how to communicate technical terms and concepts relating to the food service industry.
- Expand and update the technology available to vendors who are deaf-blind. Vendors are concerned that the technology currently offered by the BEP is too often out-of-date.
- Partner with outside organizations, such as state Vocational Rehabilitation programs, to expand available resources.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- **Be intentional about communication strategies**: Communication is a major challenge for customers and staff who work with vendors who are deaf-blind, even though most of the vendors included in this study did not report any communication problems. Commonly cited challenges in this area included reliance on third parties to hold conversations and communication characterized by repetition and slowness. BEP staff should discuss these barriers with vendors and implement proactive strategies, such as letting customers know ahead of time how to communicate and interact with vendors who are deaf-blind.

- **Provide training and support**: BEP staff in this study requested more training on the unique challenges faced by vendors who are deaf-blind and how to work effectively with this population. In particular, BEP staff requested training in sign language and tactile sign language.
- **Expand and update technology:** Vendors who are deaf-blind rely on technology to perform their jobs, yet many expressed concerns that the technology available to them through the BEP is not up-to-date. BEP staff should identify entrepreneurs' technology needs and provide updated technology that can boost productivity and improve communication.
- **Interact and observe:** BEP state directors were more likely than vendors and other staff to say that deaf-blindness did not create any major communication challenges and to have no suggestions for improving the BEP experience of vendors who are deaf-blind. In order to increase their awareness, state directors should interact with vendors on the job and consult with counselors and trainers.
- **Establish guidelines**: No BEP state directors in this study reported having official policies in place for working with vendors who are deaf-blind. State programs should consider creating official guidelines for working with vendors who are deaf-blind. These guidelines should include procedures for hiring qualified interpreters, communication strategies, and technology needs of individuals who are deaf-blind.

How Was This Project Carried Out?

Interviews were conducted by telephone or email with 41 respondents from across the country, including BEP vendors who are deaf-blind, BEP state directors, and BEP staff. Vendors and staff were asked about their experiences with the BEP, the challenges they encountered, and the accommodations they used. Respondents were also asked to provide suggestions for improving the BEP for vendors who are deaf-blind.

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

Hierholzer, A. C., & Bybee, J. (2017). Working with Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs who are deafblind: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, *111*(1), 61-71.

For more information about the Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program project, including links to an informational brochure and video, an online training course, and other resources, visit the project overview page: Best Practices in the Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program.

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