

# Issue BRIEF

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## THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM EVALUATION COACH

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State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies can use a new, free performance management tool—the VR Program Evaluation Coach ([www.VREvalCoach.com](http://www.VREvalCoach.com))—to evaluate the outcomes of their policies, programs, and services. VR agencies collect or have access to large amounts of data on client services, programs, and outcomes. However, these data may be largely underused for the purpose of improving services and outcomes. The VR Coach can help agencies use their data to better serve clients. When an agency is considering a change in services or processes, whether small or large, the VR Coach can help staff evaluate whether that change will have the desired impact. Rigorous evaluations such as these are important given the emphasis on evidence-based best practices by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and by organizations such as the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition.

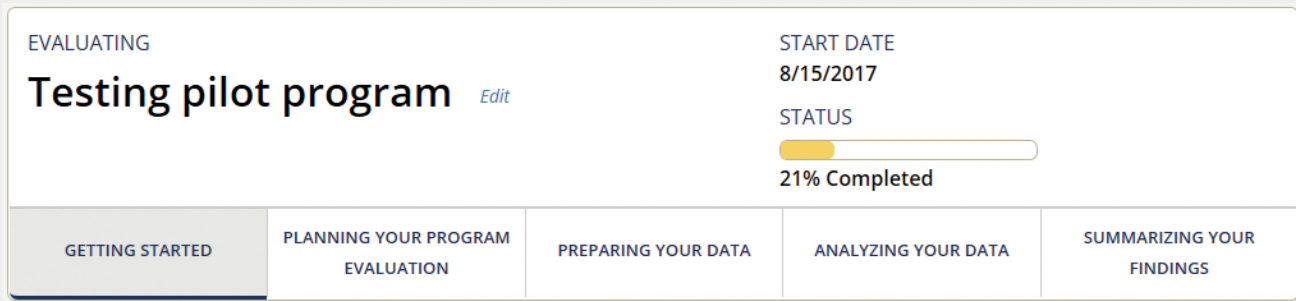
### WHAT IS THE VR COACH?

The VR Coach is a tool that enables VR program staff to test short-term and long-term impacts of the service and process innovations that they implement. The VR Coach guides users through the process of designing and conducting program evaluations and interpreting the findings. After creating a user account, VR staff can access the VR Coach through a user-friendly dashboard, which organizes the program evaluation into five straightforward steps (Figure 1). Each step contains additional direction to help users (1) gather contextual information, (2) identify and conduct the most appropriate program evaluation design, and (3) prepare and upload a data file containing the required data elements (without any personally identifying information). The VR Coach then conducts the statistical analyses and summarizes the findings. A completed program evaluation produces a findings report, which compiles the data collected by the VR Coach and helps translate the findings into action-oriented, policy-relevant information for VR agencies.

### THE VR COACH SUPPORTS A RANDOM ASSIGNMENT PROGRAM EVALUATION DESIGN

For innovations that have not yet been implemented, the VR Coach recommends a randomized controlled trial design, if feasible, because it provides the most rigorous evaluation of the impact of the new service. The VR Coach can conduct the randomization and will analyze the data to support evaluation of the service once it has been implemented. To illustrate, consider a VR agency that wants to test a model for increasing the pace of services to better engage new clients and speed up the path to employment. The VR Coach can help VR staff randomize offices or counselors to deliver the model and identify the key measures that are expected to be impacted. Once the model is implemented and the agency has collected data on participating clients, the VR Coach will analyze the resulting data on engagement and employment and determine whether the program led to the desired outcomes.

**Figure 1. Five steps on the VR Coach dashboard**



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### THE VR COACH CAN ALSO SUPPORT ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION DESIGNS

For situations in which random assignment is not feasible or for services that have already been implemented, the VR Coach guides users through the process of creating a matched comparison groups of service recipients and similar nonrecipients. Then, the VR Coach will analyze the data for those groups. For example, select VR offices across a state may implement new work-based learning experiences for transition-age youth to increase the number of youths who are employed when they finish school. To draw a comparison group, the VR Coach will help agency staff identify other offices that serve similar youths but do not provide the new work-based learning experiences. The VR Coach will analyze the data for the treatment and comparison offices and evaluate whether the new work-based learning experiences led to the desired outcomes. Although random assignment is the gold standard in program evaluation, this comparative approach can be a great alternative under the right circumstances—something that the VR Coach can help ensure.

### THE VR COACH CAN ASSESS IMPACTS OF THE INNOVATION ON SERVICE DELIVERY, CLIENT OUTCOMES, OR BOTH

The VR Coach can help staff assess whether an innovation changed the services delivered to targeted clients as planned—that is, whether the innovation was implemented with fidelity—or whether the innovation increased the number of

clients who reached a goal, such as competitive employment. Inconsistencies in how staff deliver the new services can affect the ultimate outcomes of those services. Testing how new services are implemented, either in real time or after the services end, can (1) show whether the innovation is being delivered as intended, (2) help the agency interpret the estimated impacts appropriately, and (3) indicate a need for changing how the innovation is being implemented.

### USING THE VR COACH IS TIME-SAVING AND COST-EFFECTIVE

Testing new VR processes and services is important to help agency staff identify practices that are working well, change those that are not working as intended, and improve client outcomes. Finding the time to conduct rigorous program evaluations can be time-consuming and expensive, however, and often must take into account agency priorities, the scarcity of resources, and the data analytic capabilities of the agency. The VR Coach makes it much easier for VR program evaluation staff to conduct time-saving, cost-effective, methodologically rigorous program evaluations of new or existing programs and services. Moreover, VR agency staff who are familiar with program evaluation can learn to use the VR Coach either on their own or with minimal external technical assistance (obtained by sending an email through the website).

To learn more about the VR Coach, visit [www.VREvalCoach.com](http://www.VREvalCoach.com) or contact Todd Honeycutt of the Center for Studying Disability Policy at Mathematica Policy Research at (609) 945-3397 or at [thoneycutt@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:thoneycutt@mathematica-mpr.com).

