

Discovering Opportunities for Vocational Rehabilitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Center for Studying Disability Policy Webinar

December 8, 2020

The questions below are from registrants and attendees of the Center for Studying Disability Policy webinar on December 8, 2020, titled “Discovering Opportunities for Vocational Rehabilitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” We include all questions asked during the forum that went unanswered as well as select questions asked during registration. To help facilitate responses, we de-duplicated, paraphrased, and grouped questions by category. Forum roundtable participants and the discussant provided the responses.

1. Questions about technology

- a. *Related to technology, how did each agency ensure that the platform used is accessible to those with sensory disabilities? And how do we help customers who don't have access to computers or the Internet or do not have basic computer skills to access services online?*

The vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies first considered the individual needs of customers to design person-centered approaches. In many cases, solutions had been identified beforehand by internal information technology systems staff. In other cases, as new platforms emerged, users with disabilities were asked to test new systems. Ultimately, the individual customer would be asked to test and approve of the technology before it was used or purchased. The challenges appeared when it came to rapidly deploying any new technology, but many state agencies found that in responding to immediate needs during the pandemic, they could find flexibilities in implementing solutions by gaining waivers or approval for alternative approvals. In cases in which customers didn't have access to the Internet, some state agencies could get authority to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots, laptops, or cell phones for individual customers. And, as a final strategy, returning to postal and phone contacts became necessary.

- b. *Remote interviews can limit our ability to get a true picture of the consumer and their abilities. What are some strategies to address this?*

That might be the case, but most VR agencies are noting that the frequency of contacts have increased, and, through use of technology, they are focused even more on developing a relationship with the individual customers. It could come as a result of increased awareness of the unique challenge of connecting remotely and taking special care to focus on the needs of the client. Also, providers have expanded their use of technology, which has resulted in increased access to individual customers. Although agencies know virtual services do not replace building relationships via face-to-face contact, it has pushed VR agencies and providers to think differently about how to deliver services. In the case of one state VR agency, it documented that the number of guidance and counseling hours are up significantly. And, interestingly, because video platforms are often used, the VR counselors are getting a

peek into the home life of individuals; sometimes intentionally, or other times unintentionally, as you are literally having conversations with people in their home environment. The key to success for VR agencies and providers is to be intentional about increasing efforts to reach out often. Even shorter contacts more frequently can pay great dividends.

2. Question about partnerships

- a. *Have some community service providers on which you've relied had to cut staff or close? One audience member mentioned Project Search, a residential program for transition. If so, how has that affected your services and is your agency helping these vendors stay afloat?*

Yes, and that has been one of several downsides to this period. The providers that had the capacity to bring virtual services online, however, have seen a rebound—and, in some cases, developed new virtual services that will have long-term benefits. Others that had immediate layoffs have started to build their services again. And, sadly, some smaller providers have either temporarily closed with hopes of returning or closed their doors indefinitely. The state VR agencies that had internal training centers experienced the same challenges, but most were able to transition in short order to providing virtual services and bring staff back to full time. One area agencies found to be of particular concern with the provider community was the disproportionate impact on individual supported employment customers who were in follow along. Too often, it was staff who provided the follow along services who were furloughed. Project Search services many times were relied on whether the secondary schools with whom the VR agencies partnered could maintain their educators responsible for the program. Many programs that agencies are aware of across the country were able to finish the spring through a hybrid of virtual and hands-on experiences. Some did not restart in fall 2020. Agencies are aware, however, of many that maintain the classroom training element and worked with employers to provide virtual work-based experiences.

3. Questions about pre-employment transition services

- a. *Agencies are concerned about spending the 15 percent funding on pre-employment transition services. Will this requirement be relaxed this year and next?*

Agencies do not expect there to be any changes in mandated spending on pre-employment transition, as that would require congressional approval, though the concern is real. Schools going virtual and students being less available for participation in pre-employment transition activities significantly impact many states.

- b. *How can we best engage parents with pre-employment transition services and during a student's transition from school into employment?*

As mentioned above, maximizing the use of all technology available while agencies are in a period of social distancing has to be intentional and planned. When access is limited due to lack of computers or Internet, postal service and scheduled phone conferences are still available. Some VR agencies have extended or flexible work hours, which permit VR counselors to contact individual students or youth after normal work hours to engage parents who work outside the home during the day.

c. Are agencies partnering with state Parent Training and Information Centers?

Yes. Parent Training and Information Centers are linked in many states through their participation in the VR State Rehabilitation Councils, provision of direct services to parents and youth, strategic partnerships, and delivery of webinars and virtual training.

4. Questions about employment opportunities

a. How do we quickly adjust to the fact that in-demand occupations and industries are changing?

VR agencies stay in close contact with their business partners. Each state has its own relationship protocols, but one state talked about having community specific Business Service Teams as well as regular contact with the State's Employment Commission and Economic Development partners to try to stay on top of industry demands. In addition, labor market information is tracked closely.

b. What physically distant strategies have been effective in developing relationships with employers during the pandemic?

State VR agencies may coordinate with employers to provide such services as virtual internships, informational interviews, mentors, job fairs, and job shadowing as well as host online disability awareness training and meetings with businesses. Agencies have also seen an emerging trend of online networking services for businesses interested in exchanging recruiting and retention strategies for career seekers with disabilities. Most state VR agencies have dedicated business relations staff, and their efforts during the pandemic have continued to be a priority for building capacity for businesses to be able to support outreach to and retention of talented employees with disabilities in order to meet their bottom-line needs.

c. How are your agencies supporting self-employment efforts?

This has not changed because of the pandemic. Agencies work with those who have self-employment as a goal to help develop and evaluate a business plan by providing labor market information, referral to small business agencies for technical assistance, and development of an individualized plan for employment to map out the educational and other needs.

d. What are some ways to offer work-from-home experiences that are considered legitimate competitive integrated employment?

Another unintended consequence of the pandemic is that many industries are recognizing that a considerable amount of their core business can be delivered by employees who work from home. This is clear evidence that career seekers with disabilities are a talent multiplier for many businesses. The issue of competitive integrated employment is considered on a case-by-case basis. Major competitive integrated employment points of review are whether the at-home work limits an individual's access to work that is normally found in the community, does not prevent the employee from accessing opportunities for advancement, and receives competitive wages. Self-employment opportunities continue to be an attractive option for many career seekers with disabilities, and state VR agencies develop their own processes to approve business plans and provide supports dependent upon individual interests, skills, and abilities. For example, one state is working with some brick and mortar companies (such as Advance Auto Parts) that are developing work-at-home opportunities.

5. Other questions

a. Is your state considering lifting its order of selection to serve all participants during this crisis?

Some VR agencies that have had to implement their order of selection authority have been able to release applicants from their wait lists into active services. Each state has different circumstances, however. In general, the national trend for VR agencies has been a downturn of purchased services resulting in an increase of case service dollar balances.

b. Do you see any potential long-term cost savings that might reduce the order of selection issues many state VR agencies currently face?

Nationally, it is not a matter of cost savings, as agencies are responsible for either spending the federal and state grant dollars allocated or, after the prescribed time, releasing the dollars back to the granting authority for reallocation to other VR agencies or return to the federal and state treasury. The increased case service fund trend nationally is directly related to the pandemic, and, because agencies hope for an upturn in the number of people served and the improved workforce participation rate of people of disabilities, agencies also have to be mindful of a potential spike of referrals and service dollars spending. Specific to efficiencies implemented during this unusual period that have resulted in reduced costs (less travel and expenses for state VR agencies, increased use of technology reducing time off task, such as travel time), time will tell if that extends to being beneficial to the VR agencies' fiscal bottom line.

c. Could you explain the make-up of your COVID task force?

Each state has differing composition and responsibilities. One VR agency gave an example of a strategy that included representatives from each general job classification with clear agreed-upon core values and mission. They were divided into functional teams. Each functional team developed its own team goals that were in concert with the core values and mission. Examples of functional teams are self-care (staff health and well-being), training (how to deliver services virtually), virtual service (what services to deliver virtually), and return-to-work protocols (if, when, and how to return to work).

d. How are you funding or supporting Project SEARCH programs?

In conjunction with the secondary school systems, the VR agencies are building virtual, hybrid, and (when appropriate) socially distanced work-based learning experiences protocols and strategies. In Virginia, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the Project SEARCH programs, though agencies still have many programs that have been able to work out going back in person. In all, 10 of the 19 programs are back in person 4 to 5 days a week. Others are completely virtual, a hybrid program, or had started in person and now have gone virtual. It changes frequently. Most of that is based on decisions by the schools. Some of the host businesses (hospitals) have not been able to accommodate the programs. The national conference center was not able to host the Loudoun VA SEARCH program, but it was able to move the program to Lansdowne Resort. Shortly after they began internships, the schools changed the program back to virtual. Nationally, it is a mixed bag.